

Prologue

Alternate Universe

Harry Potter fell to his knees and then collapsed onto the floor, dead. His beautiful green eyes were glazed lifelessly and a trickle of blood dripped from his split lips. Someone had obviously beaten him before using the Killing Curse to finish him off.

Peter Pettigrew stood over him, smirking in a deranged, triumphant way. He had watched the damned boy for so long, living with Peter's mother, living in Peter's house, masquerading around Peter's bedroom as if HE owned it! Which he didn't! How could his mother have allowed such a nuisance into Peter's house and given him everything that rightfully belonged to Peter?

Well, the stupid Potter boy had seen who had had the last laugh now hadn't he? Peter smugly transfigured the boy's wretched body into a pile of wood and set them ablaze, staring with morbid fascination as the wood burned. Peter walked away, completely secure in the fact that he had not only killed Harry Potter but had also completed his mission for once. The Dark Lord wouldn't be able to punish him this time!

Author's Note: hey everyone! I'm co-writing this story with a friend. We'll try to update every Friday unless we have a test or paper or something big at school. Enjoy and please review!

Chapter One: Buried Memories Brought to the Surface

Original Universe

Harry wasn't sure which had been worse: his summer with the Dursleys or the first month of school

It took far more energy than Harry expected to open his school trunk and pull out the photo album Hagrid had given him in first year. He began to flip through the pictures slowly, staring at each one and memorizing them. This was a routine he had acquired ever since the end of his fifth year.

During the summer, he had been forced to do all of the indoor chores without being allowed to go outside at all because Aunt Petunia received another owl from Dumbledore forbidding Harry to leave the house. The tension in the house reminded Harry of the summer before his fifth year. Dudley, for example, was still too scared to bother Harry even though he knew last year's dementor hadn't been sent by him. Still, Harry wished he could have a reason to lose his temper with someone and curse them into oblivion. Since Harry couldn't do this and didn't have enough tasks to keep him occupied all the time, he took to staring at the pictures in his photo album.

The first one he found was a picture of himself in his first year, shorter and much thinner than he currently was. Ron leaned against his shoulder and Hermione held her overly large books tightly against her chest, smiling happily and waving. The boy in the photograph with the emerald eyes and raven hair was smiling boyishly, seemingly without a care in the world. The only reminder of his fight for the Philosopher's Stone was a long white bandage wrapped around his head. The Harry in the photo resembled a wounded puppy that had just been given a bone and was desperate with happiness. Harry scowled at the picture in disgust.

Turning the page, Harry stared at the picture that had been taken of him with Ron and Hermione after their second year. Ron was taller with more freckles than Harry remembered; his half-smirk was something that never seemed to change. Harry stared at himself as he gently traced Hermione's face. Once again, his head was

bandaged. Strangely, the emerald eyes that had been so happy in his first year were a bit darker than he recalled. Harry even flipped the page to look back at his first year and compared the eyes. The change wasn't in the color but rather the attitude. He looked older . . . but a peculiar kind of older.

Shaking his head he continued turning the pages to look at the other pictures after his third, fourth and fifth year. He noticed the same thing: after each year he was not only older and taller but he was also darker. By his fifth year, Harry could almost see shadows in the depths of his eyes that had once been shimmering with happiness. The differences were astounding! Stopping at the final picture of himself in his fifth year, Harry's eyes gradually turned towards Ron.

Ron Weasley. Ronald Weasley. Ron, Harry's best friend and Hermione's sound board that never understood a word she said but who helped her understand an idea that she herself couldn't quite explain unless she talked about it to someone. How could he have allowed such a stupid thing like that get to him? How could he blow up at his best friend and hurt him? Well, it HADN'T been Harry's fault that Ron had been a git. All of their fights were the same.

Ron was jealous.

The moment that Harry stepped onto the train to begin his sixth year, he had been assaulted by both Ron and Hermione trying to baby him. They bought him sweets, treated him like glass, whispered to each other as if they didn't think he was strong enough to take what they said and they even brought up Sirius merely to tell him his godfather's death hadn't been his fault. They kept talking about it, they kept repeating it WASN'T HIS FAULT. They kept ignoring the horrible glint of warning building in his eyes. Harry still didn't understand why they were surprised that he had exploded with rage and refused to speak to them for the entire first month of school. So now he sat on his trunk, looking through his photo album remembering the good old days when Ron and Hermione knew better than to bring up an obviously tender subject.

Instead of spending his time sulking and acting like a spoiled brat, Harry threw himself into his DA classes. He spent his time talking to

Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom, at first just to have someone to talk to. Eventually Harry found that he was starting to enjoy his conversations with the slightly batty Luna and the steadily-growing-confident-and-occasionally-clumsy Neville. When he wasn't with either of them, Harry went to visit Hagrid as often as he could. The half-giant was usually busy dealing with his larger-than-life brother, however, so Harry rarely got to see his friend.

Focusing back on the photo album, where the memories were wonderful instead of depressing, Harry fought back tears when he found himself staring down at the wedding picture taken of the newly married James and Lily Potter as well as their best man, Sirius Black. Harry stared at their joyful faces as they turned to wave frantically at him before returning to their wedding cake. Harry watched as Lily cut a piece of the cake and began to hand-feed her new husband, who licked her fingers mischievously. Sirius stood a little behind them, sipping from his champagne glass and turning occasionally to either wave at Harry or to laugh at something just beyond the frame of the picture.

While staring at the faces of his parents and Sirius, so cheerful, happy, and completely unaware of their dreadful futures, Harry couldn't suppress the dawning of morbid realization: he was alone in the world. When Sirius had died, only the pain of his death stuck with Harry. He didn't stop to think that besides the Dursleys, (who he did NOT consider family) there was no one in the world that was like a mother or a father to him now. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley tried to be there for him as often as they could, but in Harry's mind they were RON'S parents, not his. They were more like an aunt and uncle to him. But Sirius had been almost a father to him. The only one who truly understood Harry's pain at all was Remus and he understood only because he had lost his two best friends in the world to Voldemort.

Harry continued staring down at the picture of his parents and godfather. They were gone; he would never see them again. In fact, he had never even MET his parents. His childhood had been stripped away from him and suddenly, there was nothing more to live for. Sure he had his friends, but they were likely to die because of him as well. With a start, Harry realized the turn his thoughts had taken. He had wanted to think of happy memories, not sink deeper into his

depression! He was about to put the photo album away and do something that always made him feel better (Quidditch) when there was a sudden flash of white-hot light in front of his eyes.

With a yelp, Harry fell off his school trunk and grabbed his wand from the dresser beside his bed. Looking around frantically, muscles tensed and ears alert for the smallest sound, Harry tried to find the source of the light. After a minute of fruitless searching, he found that he was indeed completely alone in his dorm. Finally relaxing, Harry lifted the photo album to make sure he hadn't banged it against something in his struggle to stand.

That was when there was another flash of bright light in front of his eyes and, suddenly, Harry felt himself falling.

Alternate Universe

Ron was getting very irritated listening to Hermione go on and on about their newest Charms assignment. She had dragged him to the library and forced him to do a total of five hours and forty-three minutes (he had timed it himself) of research before dragging him back to the Gryffindor tower in order to try out the spell SHE had found. Honestly, why couldn't she be more relaxed about her grades? True, if it wasn't for Hermione neither Ron nor Harry would have managed to survive their classes.

Of course, the fact that Harry Potter was still alive was in itself a miracle. The boy was a walking disaster, knocking over suits of armor when he tripped and nearly taking out half his year when he first tried to get on a broomstick. He was a real terror in Potions and his grades would have been enough to kick him out of school if Hermione hadn't allowed her protective-Gryffindor instincts to kick in. Even though Ron tolerated the cowardly prat, he wasn't about to call himself Harry's friend. Protecting him from Malfoy was just an excuse really.

Ron would have liked to say that he was close friends with Neville but that wasn't really true. The Golden Boy of Gryffindor was too busy

saving people and signing autographs to really make friends. Ron couldn't help being jealous of Neville, especially because Neville was so damned arrogant about his fame! Sure he had defeated the Dark Lord as a toddler but still! That didn't give him permission to think that some people were below him!

Hermione snapped Ron out of his musing by shaking him rather roughly. "Come on Ron! We have the spell, all we have to do is say it at the same time and we'll see if it's the one Professor Flitwick wanted us to find in the library."

"Honestly Hermione, I don't remember Flitwick saying anything about finding extra credit on advanced Summoning Charms." Ron muttered under his breathe. Hermione turned sharply and scowled at him with her usual do-not- defy-me-mere-mortal look that she used on only the most dim-witted.

"That's because," Hermione explained very slowly, "you were asleep when he informed the class. Remember I stepped on your foot to make you stop snoring?" Ron blushed slightly.

"That really hurt you know." Ron said, almost whining. Hermione just rolled her eyes and pulled out a book that was nearly half as large as she herself was and motioned to the marked page. "See how you have to twist your wrists and elbows? Swish, swish, dip, flick, flick and twirl. See?" Ron stared blankly at the descriptions and pictures of the hand motions required for the spell. Hermione sighed in exasperation and lifted her wand sharply. "Look, I'll show you and then we can try it together."

Ron gave Hermione a wide berth in case something nasty decided to start shooting at him the moment she summoned . . . whatever they were going to summon. The brown-haired witch stood in the middle of the deserted Common Room and lifted her wand to begin the indicated motions. "Vocare Prabia! Vocare Prabia! Vocare Prabia!" With the last twirl of her wand, there was a sudden flash of white light at the tip of her wand. Ron had to shield his eyes then rub them before he was able to see clearly.

Hermione smiled victoriously and turned to give him a smug look. "See? It's not that hard. All we have to do is bring whatever we summon to Professor Flitwick and he'll see that we took the time to do the extra credit."

"Did it work? Nothing's appearing." Ron said as he managed to see more than just a block of light in front of his eyes. He came to stand beside Hermione and peered all around the room to make sure nothing was going to attack him. "If you did it right why isn't there anything here?" Hermione scowled at him and sighed exasperatedly.

"It DID work! The flash of light was the spell working. But since only I was doing it instead of you and me together like the book says we have to, the spell wasn't strong enough to summon whatever it is we're summoning." Ron looked worriedly at the book Hermione had been referring to.

"What is it we're summoning again?" Ron asked nervously, staring as Hermione tried to teach him the wand movements.

"Something that's lost." Hermione said impatiently. After a few minutes, Ron was sure he would be able to do the spell correctly.

"Alright, remember to stay in time with me and say the words at the exact same time. This is essential. Are you listening Ron? If we don't do this perfectly we have to start all over again." Hermione stared intensely at Ron to make her point clear.

"Alright! Alright! I get it! Synchronized!" Ron muttered to himself as he loosened his shoulder slightly and waited for Hermione's nod. Both lifted their wands and began to move them at the same time in the same motions speaking the same words.

"Vocare Prabia! Vocare Prabia! Vocare Prabia!" There was a bright flash of white light and both Hermione and Ron screamed and leapt back when a body suddenly materialized above their heads and crashed into the floor at an alarming speed!

Author's Note: thank you to Geminia for reviewing the Prologue. I'm co- writing this with Rose69 so please, treat her like a goddess. She's

the reason the chapters will be coming along every week or so.
Sooner if she pushes me enough.

Chapter Two: What Once was Lost Now is Found

The first thing that Harry realized after the flash of light and the falling sensation was that the ground was VERY hard. He grunted and rolled over, putting a weak hand to his spine where it had so rudely collided with the floor. After a moment of excruciating pain and a feeble attempt to reclaim the air that had been smashed relentlessly out of his lungs, Harry realized that he still had his photo album tucked under his arm and that his glasses had miraculously not been smashed to pieces. This event will probably go down in the history books right next to Gilderoy Lockheart's many 'Most Brilliant Smile' awards: his glasses hadn't broken. "They must have a survival instinct of their own," Harry thought to himself as he managed to sit up, wincing slightly.

Ron and Hermione instantly leapt to aid Harry, who seemed to be in a great deal of pain. Pulling him to one of the couches, they let Harry sink into the cushions and groan slightly at the much softer surface. "Now why couldn't I land on one of THESE?" Harry demanded to himself groggily as he turned up his face to look at his two best friends. They were staring at him in shock and worry, both still holding their wands. Groaning softly, Harry pulled his bangs up slightly to wipe the sweat off his face. Ron stared at his forehead for a long moment. Hermione huffed and crossed her arms.

"Honestly Harry! You should be more careful!" Harry stiffened slightly at her remark. He was in pain and all Hermione could think of to do was chastise him? He didn't want to be treated like a child; he had had enough of that treatment over the last five years.

Ron scowled at Harry in disgust as he lifted Harry's bangs to stare at the thin scar. "Honestly Harry, how do you manage to cut your forehead when you landed on your back?" He didn't even have a chance to blink before he was slammed up against a wall with a wand between his eyes. He tried to move but made a gagging sound when he felt Harry's hand cruelly start to push him higher on the wall to the point that his feet dangled just off the floor.

"Who are you? What have you done with Ron?" Harry spat angrily, his green eyes flashing dangerously. Hermione leapt towards him but

Harry reacted instinctively to the motion. "Expelliarmus!" He yelled, quickly grabbing her wand in his right hand before pointing both at Ron again.

"Harry, WHAT are you doing?" Hermione screamed, too shocked by the loss of her wand to even attempt to help Ron. Harry glanced at her briefly, his eyes narrowed, before turning back to Ron and raising both wands higher. He had just decided to use the body-binding jinx on both possible Death Eaters when he was jolted by a large amount of power transferring into his body. He was so surprised by the sudden power boost that he had not realized he had loosened his grip on Ron until he was hit by the same jinx he had planned on using against his attackers.

Harry found himself on his back, staring at the ceiling. His limbs felt bound and constricted. "I'm a predator! I shouldn't be the one on my back!" A part of him screamed, momentarily forgetting about his sudden power boost to brood internally. He couldn't even remember a time that he had been so vulnerable: even as a baby confronted by Voldemort he still had had his mother's protection.

Ron and Hermione entered his line of vision, both staring down into his face. Ron was clearly furious; the reddening of his ears more than enough proof to come to that conclusion and Hermione seemed to be battling between shock, outrage and a curiosity that never abandoned her.

"Hermione, we should get this . . . imposter to Dumbledore." Ron said snidely. He couldn't help thinking in the back of his mind that maybe, just maybe, turning in this obvious Death Eater would result in him becoming famous like Neville. After all, Aurors became famous all the time for capturing Death Eaters. If Ron caught one at such a young age, wouldn't that make him famous too? Even a little? He could pretend Hermione was small and frightened. After all, HE was the one who had used the body-bind jinx on him! HE had saved Hermione!

Hermione's thoughts were nowhere near those of Ron. The young man lying on the floor at her feet, looking disgruntled and angry HAD to be Harry Potter. He looked exactly the same . . . except for his

violent nature of course. Harry was a coward, through and through. He would have crawled under a table and rocked in a fetal position rather than so much as look Ron in the eyes. And yet this Harry not only stared boldly into Ron's eyes, he had actually LIFTED RON OFF HIS FEET! This was completely insane behavior, even for a Death Eater. A Death Eater, after all, would have never blown their cover so easily. And even if a Death Eater would be stupid enough to put him or herself into a compromising position, why would they do it over a scar? Wait, Harry didn't have a scar like that. The only one who had a scar like THAT was Neville and that was because

Harry could tell that Hermione's brain was traveling a mile a minute just as it always did when she stumbled into a new train of thought. Gradually he stopped fighting the bindings and waited for the inevitable moment when Hermione's curiosity became too great and she would release him and ask him millions of questions. Personally, he wanted some answers too. Such as why they were behaving so oddly, especially when Ron mentioned Harry's scar so casually. Usually Ron didn't bring up the scar unless he was particularly angry at Harry.

Ron was preparing to knock Harry unconscious when Hermione stepped a little in front of his wand, eyes burning with curiosity. She HAD to know, she just HAD to! It would eat her up inside if she couldn't find out! Honestly, what was the harm in trying to find out a little more about this person that was Harry and yet . . . couldn't possibly be the cowardly little Gryffindor she had grown up with?

"If we take off the bonds do you promise not to attack us again? Just blink twice." Harry seemed to consider for a moment before blinking twice. After all, if they WERE Death Eaters, what could they possibly do to him if he got to them before they got to him? Ron grabbed her wand arm, looking outraged.

"Hermione, what are you DOING?!" He squeaked out the last part when he glanced down at the smoldering green eyes staring back at him. Those eyes . . . those weren't Harry's eyes! Not the Harry HE knew! The Harry he knew was a bloody coward, too afraid that he would poke his own eye out with his wand and too thick to really remember what spells to use. This Harry was . . . dangerous! He had

threatened Ron and Ron KNEW, he knew in his bones that if this Harry had wanted to harm him, Ron would be writhing on the floor in pain rather than standing beside Hermione at that moment. And she wanted to RELEASE this monster?!

"Ron," she started with difficulty, "how are we going to figure out who he is if we don't let him talk?" Ron shook his head fiercely.

"NO! He'll attack us again! We have to take him to Dumbledore!"

"But RON, aren't you even the least bit curious? If we give him to the headmaster, then we'll probably never find out who he is! Professor Dumbledore will just try to get information on You-Know-Who from him, possibly kill him, he might escape, but no matter what we'll never find out! And I want to know who he is!" She was giving him the stubborn look she always did when she had set her mind to something. No matter how stubborn Ron was, when Hermione was in pursuit of knowledge, she was unyielding. When he realized he had no choice, Ron finally sighed in defeat.

"Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you." He grumbled as he waited for Hermione to remove the jinx. Once she did, Harry sat up and calmly went to sit on the couch again, staring at them both intensely. Both Gryffindors felt uncomfortable under his harsh scrutiny. Surely, Hermione thought, I must have been wrong. This can't be Harry, not even with a spell on him. This has to be someone else. Maybe he wasn't a Death Eater but definitely not the Harry they knew.

"So who are you?" Hermione demanded bluntly, staring at him fixedly.

"Harry Potter. Who are YOU?" He countered, eyes narrowed as they traveled to where Hermione was clutching his wand. "I want that back please." Hermione thoughtlessly handed it to him. "Now again, who are you?" Ron didn't even bother to protest, he knew he had been violently shunned out of the conversation.

"I'm Hermione Granger and you can't be Harry Potter." Harry arched an eyebrow.

"And you can't be Hermione Granger. The Hermione I know wouldn't attack me." He tapped the tip of his wand against his temples. "Although, the Hermione I know WOULD release a possible Death Eater out of curiosity." Hermione's eyes widened slightly as she blushed.

"Well, the Harry I know would never attack anyone." He sighed and rested the back of his head against the sofa.

"I normally DON'T attack anyone who isn't trying to kill me, though that happens more often than I would like." He glanced at Ron for a long moment. "But when you pretended not to know about my scar I knew there had to be something wrong." Ron blinked, dazed by being brought back into the conversation.

"Your scar? You mean the one on your forehead?" Ron asked curiously, trying to keep the thought in mind that the young man sitting in front of him was acting in a manner that he had never seen anyone behave. A sense of danger radiated around him but the only part of him that actually seemed alive were his eyes. They were crackling intensely with barely restrained power.

"The scar Voldemort gave me when I was a baby." Harry said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Both Gryffindors immediately flinched at the Dark Lord's name, said so very easily, from a boy that normally referred to the Dark Lord with the utmost terror. In fact, this Harry seemed only annoyed by the mention of Voldemort. Almost as if Voldemort was neither worth HIS time nor even his fear. Ron and Hermione's eyes widened and both simply stared at him. Hermione finally smiled.

"Oh! I understand now! You've gotten your identity mixed up with Neville's! He has a scar just like that which he got from You-Know-Who." Hermione said triumphantly. Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"Neville? Neville Longbottom? Are you sure you're feeling alright Hermione? Neville was never attacked when he was a baby, I was. Why do you think Voldemort's been trying to kill me my entire life?" Hermione and Ron stared blankly at him.

"He DEFINITELY hit his head." Ron muttered.

"I'm not lying!" Harry started angrily, eyes narrowed. He tightened his hand around his wand and forced his breathing to relax. Getting angry would only make convincing the two disbelieving Gryffindors about his true identity impossible. Though he had to admit, the thought of throttling Ron and Hermione was thoroughly appealing in his current situation.

"Well, you can't be the Harry Potter WE know! I mean, honestly, you appeared through a SPELL!" Suddenly, Hermione's face took on that thoughtful look it had had when she was figuring out that Harry couldn't possibly be a Death Eater. Both Ron and Harry turned to her, knowing what that look meant. Getting her to actually tell them was the frustrating part. "Oh for Heaven's sake just TELL us Hermione!" Ron finally blurted out, too impatient for her to return to the world of the living. She snapped her head up, momentarily disoriented before smiling.

"Why don't I just ask Professor Flitwick? If he really IS under some sort of spell, then the professor should know what to do with him, right?" Harry cleared his throat.

"Erm, I AM here. I AM a real person you realize?" Hermione and Ron exchanged disbelieving looks before starting out of the Common Room. Harry followed after them because he too was curious to know why he had been dropped into an obviously foreign place. Now that he thought about it and looked around the castle on his way to the Charms classroom, he realized everything felt different. Not necessarily bad just . . . different. The air had a different feel; the light reflected differently, everything was just ALIEN. Harry shivered at the feeling of homesickness that shook him.

"Professor Flitwick!" Hermione called as she hurried towards the tiny Charms professor. He looked up and smiled happily, stopping on his way into his classroom to wait for them. When the three arrived, he finally spoke.

"Yes Ms. Granger? Is there something I may help you with?" Hermione smiled confidently at the professor, pushing her frizzy brown hair back from out of her eyes.

"Well, Ron and I were going to do the Charms extra credit concerning the advanced summoning charm. The Vocare Prabia spell. We were just wondering what that spell summons." Flitwick went from looking bubbly to down-right horrified.

"Ms. Granger, was this spell in a large black book with silver and gold threaded into the binding?" Hermione blinked confusedly but nodded. "Ms. Granger, I and many other professors are of the opinion that this book should be placed in the Restricted Section. There are several spells, the Vocare Prabia spell in particular, that have been deemed not only dangerous but possibly Dark Magic. Please return it immediately and DO NOT USE THAT SPELL! It has been known to summon people from other dimensions! Could you imagine the danger of it? Summoning a PERSON from a universe where you may not even exist Ms. Granger! Well, I'm glad you didn't use the spell. Oh, and Mr. Potter, please work harder on your next essay, your grades are getting worse my boy." The tiny professor walked past them, cheerful again as he entered his classroom.

He left three astonished and completely horrified students behind.

Author's Note: thanks you Cynical Slytherin, Geminia and Lania for reviewing the last chapter. Again, worship Rose69. She is the reason this fic exists. ^_^ she helps me with ideas during Philosophy and History class (we WOULD work on it in English but our teacher is frightening, a bit like Snape in regards to keeping a class quiet really).

Chapter Three: Recounting Tragic History

"This is impossible!" Ron declared, pacing the Common Room furiously. The three had just returned from their visit with Flitwick. Hermione was sitting there looking shocked and guilty, Ron was pacing furiously at having discovered that Harry not only wasn't a Death Eater but also actually WAS the Harry he knew, even if he was from another universe. Harry himself was sitting quietly beside Hermione, staring into the fire with a look of deep concentration.

He was in a bad situation. No, he was in a TERRIBLE situation. And to make matters worse, there was no way to get home. He couldn't go to Dumbledore because, frankly, Harry couldn't help hating him after his fifth year. He couldn't go to McGonagall because, though he respected her highly, he knew the professor either wouldn't believe him or wouldn't be skilled enough in Charms to help him. As for asking Flitwick, there was a definite chance that Hermione would get into a large amount of trouble for using a spell that was not only dangerous, but that she hadn't researched as thoroughly as she had first thought. No matter how angry he was at the Hermione from his universe, he couldn't penalize the Hermione here for trying to improve her grade. She hadn't meant any ill will towards him specifically.

That was one thing that had thoroughly infuriated Harry: he couldn't be angry with Ron and Hermione because they didn't know the real him. The second thing that infuriated Harry was that he couldn't start throwing things. But going back to why he couldn't be angry with Ron or Hermione, he truly wished that he could. They had angered him so much at home that he had been at the point where he would have snapped at them again had he been given the chance. But now . . . seeing Ron and Hermione again but strangely less protective was a huge improvement in his opinion.

Hermione guiltily looked towards Harry, wondering if he was angry with her for virtually kidnapping him and stranding him in another universe. Surely his mother was missing him and maybe his friends (if he had them). Who knew? Maybe in his home universe his parents hadn't been so awful to him; maybe they had loved him and were waiting for him worriedly. Maybe He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had

been killed, or maybe he didn't even exist! Maybe this Harry knew Hermione and maybe he didn't. He certainly seemed to.

Ron was furious with not only being proven wrong but also having been proven wrong so adamantly. First, Harry, someone who obviously should NOT have appeared out of a Summoning Spell, got dropped unceremoniously in front of him. Next, he was attacked for making ONE crack about some stupid scar on his forehead. Now he found out that there was ANOTHER Harry from ANOTHER universe that had been dropped on his lap and he was expected to keep this from everyone? Sure he could keep a secret but this was dangerous! Shouldn't Dumbledore know about something this big?

"I'm sorry." Hermione said in a tiny voice. Both boys turned to look at her, shocked out of their own musings.

"What?" Harry said, looking a little confused.

"I'm sorry for Summoning you here and putting you in a bad position like this." She continued quietly, fidgeting with the hem of her robes. Her face was a little pink from embarrassment and Ron was shocked to see her not looking at Harry when she spoke to him. Hermione never apologized. True, she never had a REASON to do so but seeing her nervous like this was so unlike Hermione it was uncanny. Harry visibly relaxed and even smiled, a motion so charming Hermione almost melted into the couch. Ron stared at him. The Harry he knew couldn't do that, especially to someone like Hermione.

"It's alright, you didn't know, which, frankly, surprises me. The Hermione I know would never use a spell that she didn't know like the back of her hand." Hermione blushed again, looking down at her lap.

"Well, I was really excited to use this particular spell and I didn't want anyone to find it before me so I . . . I thought it would be okay. I'm sorry." Harry shook his head.

"Think nothing of it . . . but since I AM here and we obviously can't let anyone know about me, maybe you should tell me a little more about your world so that I don't start confusing facts. I'd especially like to know the whole deal with Voldemort and Neville, exactly WHAT were

you talking about before?" Hermione shifted slightly. She was much more comfortable now that she was on familiar territory.

"I suppose the most important thing to know is that Neville Longbottom, he's a boy in our year, is the Boy Who Lived. His house was attacked by Death Eaters on Halloween when he was a little over a year old and his parents were put into St. Mungo's because of over exposure to the Cruciatus Curse." Harry's eyes widened slightly. "And he has a scar just like yours, which is very strange." Hermione said, pointing at Harry's forehead. Harry hesitantly touched his bangs and contemplated telling them. Well, it wouldn't make much of a difference now would it? The Dark Lord would obviously have a tremendous dislike, maybe even hatred of Neville, but at least Voldemort's intense focus wouldn't be on Harry. There would be no reason for it.

"In my world, I'M the Boy Who Lived. Voldemort's been after me my entire life. He gave me this scar," Harry tapped his forehead with the tip of his wand, "when I was a little over a year old after he murdered my parents." Ron and Hermione stared at him, obviously surprised by this bit of news.

"Erm, well, in our first year Neville followed Professor Quirrel into this secret passage and managed to save the Philosopher's Stone." Hermione said a bit nervously. The topic of Halloween didn't seem to be a pleasant one for her either.

"I did that in my first year as well." Harry said calmly. "Actually, the three of us: you, me and Ron. We're best friends in my universe you see? You figured out that the Philosopher's Stone had to be under a trap door. So you and I took turns playing a pipe to lull Fluffy, Hagrid's three-headed dog to sleep while we slid down the trap door. Then you told us we had to relax when we got trapped in Devil's Snare." Harry had to smile at the memory. "Ron made fun of you a little because you were so shocked that you forgot that witches can create fire." Hermione and Ron exchanged incredulous looks. "I was the youngest Seeker of the century, so the next task of capturing a flying key was alright until the keys started attacking me. Anyway, then Ron played a large-as-life chess game where he had to sacrifice himself so we could go on. After that Hermione figured out a riddle for a

potion to see something called the Mirror of Erised, where the stone was hidden." Hermione and Ron were completely lost though they continued listening to Harry.

The thought of doing something . . . like saving the Philosopher's stone from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or at least assisting in it, was setting Ron's mind spiraling. He was friends with a famous person in another universe, probably THE most famous person aside from Merlin. And this Harry was most definitely telling the truth. He was staring Ron in the eyes, a slight amusement apparent as he stared at him. At Hermione. As if they were all friends. Not better than them, actually FRIENDS.

He wasn't at all like Neville.

"What else did we do? What about second year?" Harry sat back, surprised by how excited Ron looked. He didn't remember his Ron being happy about the dangerous expeditions the three of them had undergone. Ron nearly died because of the troll and the chess game: why was this Ron so excited to hear that he had nearly been killed?

"Well," Harry began as he tried to sum up the year, "Ginny was possessed by the diary of Tom Riddle, who was Voldemort's sixteen-year-old self, we used a Polyjuice Potion to spy on Malfoy, we proved Lockhart to be a fraud, I killed the basilisk and Hermione was petrified." Both Gryffindors stared at him, mouths hanging open. "Oh, and Nick's Deathday Party . . . and meeting Argog."

"Who?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Hagrid's pet spider. He was framed for moaning Myrtle's death by Riddle." Harry explained calmly. "Argog and his family nearly ate Ron and me." Ron's eyes were wide and his face was so pale he was in danger of fainting.

"S-s-s-spider?" Ron squeaked. Harry nodded, glancing amusedly at Hermione when she didn't hide her grin.

"Don't laugh. We're talking about millions of spiders the size of buses and cars." Hermione stopped grinning and Ron made a soft whimpering sound.

"Er, well, Neville snuck into the Chamber of Secrets after Ginny." Hermione said quickly, slightly embarrassed. Ron perked up at the change in topic.

"Wait, did you say that the diary had You-Know-Who's fifteen year-old- self? And HE was the one that possessed Ginny?"

"He was sixteen." Harry said calmly. "And yes, he was forcing Ginny to do those things." Ron grew increasingly angrier as Harry spoke.

"Then my sister was framed! She was suspended and nearly sent to Azkaban!" Harry's eyes widened with shock. Ginny had been suspended? She had nearly been sent to Azkaban? Why hadn't he thought of it before?

"Harry?" No answer. "Ha-rry!" Ron waved his arms wildly in front of Harry's face, trying to bring his attention back to earth. This was the second time Ron found a wand between his eyes.

"Ron, you never know when to keep your mouth closed and your hands to yourself." Hermione muttered under her breathe. Ron glared at her in disbelief (he was at wand point and she was making JOKES?!) and Harry was fighting to hide a grin as he pulled his wand back.

"Sorry," Harry said casually as he sat back, relaxing. "It's an old habit." Ron stared at him for a long moment before shaking his head.

"So what happened in third year?" Ron asked, trying to change the focus from his current embarrassment. He was still uncomfortable having someone he had never considered a threat to his ego suddenly making him feel like an out-right fool. The only ones who could do that now were his mother, Malfoy and Longbottom. As of now, Harry was the number one ego- bruiser on Ron's list. Now that Ron thought about it, it really made no sense. He didn't have any such list! And Harry wasn't a threat, he was just annoying! A tiny

voice in the back of his head that sounded suspiciously Hermione-ish cackled scornfully at his denial.

"Well, in my third year . . ." Harry stopped, pushing back the wave of grief he felt when thinking about Sirius. Thinking about what had happened. Thinking about what his stupidity had resulted in. "In my third year, there were a lot of dementors." Harry said simply.

"Dementors?" Hermione asked curiously, trying to prod Harry to continue.

"Yeah, I don't really want to talk about them." Ron opened his mouth but Hermione gave him a look. Ron HATED that look but he knew better than to speak now.

"Alright, then what about your fourth year?" Harry again stared at the wall.

"Cedric was Hogwarts' champion but he died when Voldemort came back." Harry said briefly, gazing mournfully at the floor. Ron again opened his mouth but Hermione glared at him. Ron growled in frustration.

"Will you tell us what happened LAST year at least?" Harry stared blankly at the wall before glaring coldly at him.

"No, I won't tell you what happened last year." Ron, again, opened his mouth to yell that not telling them was stupid, but this time it was Harry's look that made him shut his mouth. The look of utter fierceness and tremendous sorrow terrified him to the bone. How could someone so young have a look so absolutely sad?

"Er, well, anyway . . . I guess . . . we should get to bed." Ron said nervously. Hermione was about to speak but Harry stood up abruptly, grabbed his photo album and hurried to the dorms, crawling immediately into his bed. He forced himself not to think about Sirius, instead concentrating on wicked thoughts about his first day of school in this alien universe. He couldn't wait for morning!

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Chapter Four: Something Worth Leaving For

Someone was shaking him.

Harry groaned and rolled over, burying his face deeper into his pillow. The damned person just wouldn't take a hint and continued shaking him, even sighing dramatically and saying "wake UP Harry!" until pretty much everyone BUT Harry was wide awake and glaring at Ron. Hermione had given him the strict order to get Harry out of bed even if he had to be dragged by the hair wearing nothing more than a bed sheet. Ron, of course, had given Hermione a look but she had conveniently slipped out of the Common Room and gone to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Returning to Harry, the raven haired boy somehow managed to shift his head under his pillow and grunt a faint "lea' me 'lone Ron" before trying to snuggle deeper into the safety of his covers. Ron glared down at the helpless mass of sheets where Harry was buried (somewhere in there). Neville got up gradually, yawning and stretching before staring at Harry.

"What's the matter with Harry?" Neville demanded, arching an eyebrow at Ron. Feeling extremely privileged at being spoken to by Neville Longbottom, THE Neville Longbottom, Ron nearly melted into a puddle of happiness before remembering that he had been asked a question.

"Oh, I guess he's just tired is all."

"Tired of what? Failing?" Neville began laughing superiorly and Ron quickly followed. Staring at him admiringly, Ron felt as if he and Neville were connected. Surely they had a common goal that Ron could rise to. Maybe they could be friends. Maybe they could be famous together.

Another moan from Harry reminded Ron that he would either have to drag the raven-haired boy out of bed or be killed by Hermione. With another dramatic sigh, Ron tapped Harry's shoulder with his wand. "Hey, Potter, I don't want to have to curse you." The result was instantaneous.

Five spells had been shot in various directions, thankfully not hitting anyone since they were just a few inches above even Ron's head and Harry had been fumbling for his glasses. The spells, of course, had been aimed higher because Death Eaters were taller than teenaged boys. By the time Harry had jammed the stubborn spectacles on his nose, the boys had dived for cover. When Ron dared a glance in Harry's direction, he was slightly surprised to find said boy staring at him as if he were crazy.

"Did I or did I not warn you yesterday that threatening me in any way was a bad idea?" Ron nodded dumbly. He could vaguely remember Harry threatening him, going on about not attacking him and something about his fifth year. Of course, he couldn't have paid attention if he had wanted to. He had already accustomed himself to blocking out anything that Harry said. It was usually nonsense. Well, THIS had certainly woken him up! He'd have to listen very carefully to everything that this Harry said. He was dangerous!

"It's . . . time for breakfast." Ron said hurriedly. "Hermione's waiting for us." He quickly left the dorm, looking a bit red. Neville slowly got out from under his bed and stared at Harry.

"Erm, right." Harry muttered as he climbed out of bed, hurriedly getting changed and following after Ron. Both boys cleared their throats, glancing nervously at each other before hurrying through the many hallways leading to the Great Hall. Ron and Harry were about to walk in at the same time when Ron stood back, nodding for Harry to go in first. Harry glanced at him, slightly perturbed, but went in first. It seemed that Ron didn't want to have his back to Harry. This didn't hurt as much as Harry thought it would.

"THERE you are! I've been waiting for nearly half an hour!" Hermione said exasperatedly as the boys took a seat across from her. She rummaged in her bag and handed Harry a piece of parchment.

"What's this?" Harry asked, looking over it curiously.

"It's your schedule." Hermione said distractedly as she hauled out a massive book and slammed it on the table. Harry scanned it, eyes widening in shock and outrage.

"REMEDIAL CLASSES?!" Several people turned to look at him curiously but he didn't care. He was staring at his schedule incredulously. "Remedial DEFENSE?! Are you bloody kidding me?" Hermione looked around worriedly and hissed at Harry.

"Be quiet! You're drawing attention to yourself!" She shook her head. "The Harry we know would do anything to keep attention off him. And he's only good in THOSE classes," she pointed at his schedule "but he's only marginally good in Ancient Runes." Harry blocked out the rest of her ranting and just stared at his schedule, taking a deep breathe. This was going to be a long day.

Neville made his way towards Harry and made a show of sitting beside him, making several students crane their heads to stare at Harry strangely. Harry, completely accustomed to being stared at, didn't even look up at the eerie sensation crawling up his spine that resulted from being watched. Ron stared at Harry and felt slightly unsettled that the raven haired boy wasn't staring at Neville in awe but was, instead, sitting there staring at his schedule as if it were so much more interesting than Neville.

"Harry." Neville said, looking a bit confused as well.

"Mm?" Harry said distractedly, eyes traveling along his schedule. Honestly, Remedial Defense? He had to hand it to this alternate universe: it certainly had a cruel sense of irony to it. In his own world, Remedial Defense was the equivalent of putting Professor Snape in a first year class and patiently explaining to him how to make a mild sleeping potion. Hopefully he would be able to keep the limelight off of himself now. True, he WAS very gifted in Defense but that also happened to be the subject that got him the most fame. Maybe here he could be an ordinary boy, at least for as long as he was going to stay. He had no intention of leaving his home universe to the insane whims of Voldemort, especially because this universe was so annoying.

"Hey, Harry!" Neville said a bit impatiently as he noticed Harry's attention drifting away from his schedule and even farther from him. He wasn't used to being ignored. He was the Boy Who Lived for God's sake!

"Yes Neville?" Harry turned to him with forced patience, looking annoyed and slightly bored. Neville blinked, looking a bit mystified before composing himself.

"Shouldn't we be getting to Herbology?" He said, trying to match Harry's bored look. When he realized that he was trying to copy HARRY POTTER, he shook his head and tried to gather his thoughts. What was going on? Since when did Harry not revere the ground Neville walked on? And why was HE, the famous Boy Who Lived, copying a little nobody like Harry Potter? What had HE ever done for the good of the world?

"Herbology? Oh right, Herbology." Harry got up and nodded to Ron and Hermione before starting out of the Great Hall. Neville blinked and nodded to them as well, hurrying to follow Harry. When he realized he was copying him again, Neville straightened and calmly told himself that Harry was just having a good day. Yes, that had to be it. Harry was really just a sniveling little loser no matter how often Neville protected him from Malfoy or any other Slytherin for that matter.

When Harry entered the green house, he thought for a moment that he had walked into the wrong one. There were seventh years, students he knew by reputation in his own universe as extremely skilled Herbologists. He was lost for a long moment, looking around for some kind of lifeline back to reality.

"Stop standing there and gaping, you'd think you were in the wrong class!" Hermione hissed into his ear as she grabbed his wrist and dragged him to the back of the greenhouse and set about getting their gloves. Harry scowled after her.

"Well, I'm technically NOT in this class." He hissed as he tugged on his dragon hide gloves. Hermione looked at him in confusion.

"What?" Hermione asked curiously. Harry sighed, whispering fiercely so as not to be heard by anyone but her.

"REMEDIAL Defense? And Transfiguration?" He shook his head, truly insulted. "If anything, I should be TEACHING Defense! I even started a club last year where I trained some people in our year, even got in trouble for it later with Umbridge." Harry scowled at the memory of Umbridge almost catching his DA members when Cho's bratty little friend went off blabbing about them. Harry unconsciously ran his left hand over the faint scars on his right hand where the words "I will not tell lies" were still imprinted.

"You TAUGHT a Defense class?" Hermione demanded, eyes wide.

"Yes, it was actually YOUR idea." Harry said, making Hermione's mouth drop open. She realized how odd she must have looked and snapped her mouth shut, blushing slightly. "Ron and I were a really bad influence on you. You started breaking a lot of school rules with us, especially after second year." Hermione looked up, outraged.

"I would NEVER break a school rule!" She said haughtily. She lowered her voice when Professor Sprout looked at them oddly. Harry began to prune the strange plant in front of them just as Hermione was doing. When the professor looked away, Harry turned back to look at Hermione.

"You actually thought up and did most of the work in our second year when we made a Polyjuice Potion." Harry said. Hermione's eyes widened. "Yes, a Polyjuice Potion. It didn't work too well for you because you accidentally took a cat hair instead of one of Millicent Bultstrode's. But Ron and I were able to get hairs from Crabbe and Goyle so we could get into the Slytherin common room. In third year you used your Time-turner to . . . to help someone." Harry immediately grew quiet and paid extra attention to what he was doing. He moved aside tendrils of vines from around the plant that was mysteriously glowing. Harry knew, somewhere in the back of his mind, that this plant was familiar. What it was, he wasn't completely sure. Hermione looked shocked again.

"I would NEVER do that! It's against the wizarding LAW, not just some school rule!" She said. She had to lower her voice again when Sprout gave her another curious look. Harry shook his head and sighed.

"You had to do it though; it was to save someone's life." He said, forcing himself not to remember how Sirius smiled at him and how happy and comfortable Harry felt with his godfather. Had felt. He couldn't get used to thinking of his godfather in the past tense. It just hurt so much knowing that he was really gone. Hermione opened her mouth before closing it, looking sheepish. She had to admit, it WAS very flattering to hear that she saved people's lives with Harry and Ron. It was like a fairy tale really; she loved to daydream that she could help people with her knowledge.

A piercing shriek shattered her thoughts as everyone turned towards the source of the sound. Harry stood rooted to his spot, shears held over a clipped vine as the plant writhed slightly. Sprout hurried over and muttered a quick spell to soothe the cut vine. Everyone turned their eyes to Harry, he was turning red.

"Please Mr. Potter! Be careful with the vines! You should know that this plant has healing properties but cannot heal itself when one of its vines is severed." Sprout said, looking a bit surprised as well. Harry never made a mistake in her class. Had something happened to him in one of his other classes? Was Ms. Granger distracting him too much? But she was such a good student! Surely it had just been an accident. It WAS very early in the morning after all and Harry was known to be especially clumsy in the morning.

"Sorry Professor, it won't happen again." Harry muttered, still a bit red from embarrassment. The rest of the class was spent trying not to embarrass himself further. After his first lapse in attention, Neville had moved over to "help" him. He would smile charmingly at the girls in the class and tell Harry how if only he would cut the branches like SO, and then Harry wouldn't make anymore mistakes. Hermione rolled her eyes when she overheard this.

Harry was getting angrier and angrier listening to Neville go on and on about fame. He was beginning to remind Harry a lot of Lockhart,

with his talks of fame and guiding Harry. The constant smiling at the girls solidified this new image of Neville and completely destroyed the image of the boy that Harry had come to respect in his own world. The Neville he knew was, yes, clumsy and a bit uncertain about his own abilities, but that had changed drastically during their fifth year. Neville had demonstrated himself to be quite powerful and truly kind. If someone was having trouble or was embarrassed, he would try to draw attention back to himself by doing something especially clumsy.

Whether he was aware of it or not, Neville tried to protect people. And Harry had always thought that Neville was worse off than himself, what with the horrible things that had happened to both of their parents. Though Harry's parents had been murdered, he thought it was far worse that Neville's parents were still alive but insane. They couldn't even recognize their own son! He didn't know what HE would do if his own parents couldn't remember him. But this new Neville was trying his patience. The only thing keeping him from attacking the boy was a) he wasn't a Death Eater and b) Harry still respected the memory of the Neville that HE knew.

When the class finally ended, Harry practically ran out of the greenhouse. If he had to deal with this in ALL of his new classes, he would go mad by the end of the day!

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Chapter Five: All Eyes On Me

Plopping down beside Ron, Hermione looked nervously at Harry. The raven haired boy seemed to be completely emotionless on the outside but his eyes were smoldering. Smoldering eyes were a bad sign. At least, she THOUGHT it was. People that were happy didn't have smoldering eyes. They had SHINING eyes but not smoldering.

Ron was so immersed in his lunch that he didn't even realize that the young man across from him was on the verge of grabbing his wand and cursing Neville into oblivion. Speaking of Neville, the Boy Who Lived of this universe had decided to grace Harry with his presence during lunch and was chattering on about something or other. THAT got Ron's attention and he stared at Neville in surprise. Could it be? Had Neville finally seen the potential in Ron? Would they become friends at last?

"Excuse me, Neville?" Harry finally said in an emotionless tone of voice. Hermione felt the hairs on the back of her neck bristle with warning. She had only felt like this when the troll had entered the girl's bathroom in her first year. Harry wasn't going to attack Neville . . . was he? She looked at them worriedly.

"Oh, yes Harry?" This part snapped Ron out of his daydreaming and made his ears turn red with jealousy. Yes HARRY? He had been talking to HARRY? He was there only to be with HARRY? No! It was supposed to be RON that would be the famous best friend of the Boy Who Lived! A tiny voice in the back of his mind reminded him that this Harry WAS the Boy Who Lived in his own universe and his counterpart WAS this Harry's best friend.

"Would you please let me concentrate? It's very difficult to do so with you talking nonsense." Neville stared at Harry in shock. Nonsense? Had he just been told that he spoke NONSENSE?!

"Excuse me?!" He said indigently, trying to gather his thoughts for a witty retort. But how should he retort? Neville had never even considered Harry as one of the people that could insult him otherwise he would have thought of some very clever remarks as he did with

Malfoy. But . . . but . . . Harry wasn't an enemy! He wasn't SUPPOSED to think of his words as nonsense!

Harry watched with barely concealed amusement as Neville sat there looking quite lost. Really, Neville was just as transparent as Ron! He wore his expression on his sleeve. He even had the same expression Ron wore whenever he was confused (which was often). Perhaps this universe would be more amusing then he had originally thought.

Harry patted Neville's head patronizingly before giving him a devilish smirk. "Really Neville, you'll gather flies with that goldfish imitation of yours." With that, Harry lifted Neville's chin with his index finger, firmly closing his mouth. Neville turned red with embarrassment, fury, and a tinge of confusion, even looking towards Hermione for help. Now THIS was a look that Harry recognized: Neville confused. Ron gazed in wonder at Harry, too shocked to really do anything but stare.

"Harry, I don't know WHAT'S wrong with you but-,"

"Something wrong Longbottom?" A silky drawl from behind them cut off the beginnings of a promisingly long rant. Harry turned his head, eyes narrowing instinctively at the voice he had come to despise. To his surprise, Draco Malfoy wasn't looking at him but at NEVILLE! Then he remembered where he was. He didn't think he would be getting used to this new universe any time soon, not with the annoying parallels that were confusing him so much that he wasn't sure about his own home anymore.

For instance, had Ron always been a prat and Harry just hadn't realized? Had Hermione always been so absent-minded and bossy, especially to Neville? Would Hermione have treated HIM like that if he hadn't been the Boy Who Lived? And why the HELL had he always hated all Slytherins again? After all, the Sorting Hat had nearly placed HIM in Slytherin. What if the Slytherins had been in Harry's exact position (not wanting to be placed in Slytherin but with the qualifications to be in it) except they had had the pressure of their parents' (*cough* Death Eaters) expectations forcing them into the house?

'What the bloody hell am I THINKING?!' Harry thought when he actually considered the last bit. Where had that last thought even COME from? He was a TRUE Gryffindor, not some naïve idiot like Dumbledore who would trust anyone, especially Snape, with vital information that could get people killed! Besides, Malfoy and the other Slytherins had always been especially cruel to anyone outside of their own house! WHY was he suddenly thinking like this? Sirius would have been so disappointed in him.

That made Harry feel numb with shame.

"Hel-LO!" Harry jumped and reflexively reached into his robes but stopped himself. It was only Malfoy. Hexing him would prove nothing and wouldn't make anyone feel satisfied. Well, maybe Ron and Neville but they weren't important. Releasing the death grip he had on his wand, Harry calmly looked up at Malfoy. Straight in the eyes. Those blue-gray eyes that he had come to dislike. Not hate; only the Dark Lord, Lestrangle and Pettigrew had his utmost hate. Neither Dumbledore nor Snape had been able to earn his loathing because they hadn't killed any of the people that he had cared for profoundly.

Draco couldn't help doing a mental double take. Was it just him or was Potter staring at him with an unnatural intensity? Potter had never looked at him like that before. Hell, NO ONE had ever looked at him like that before! There was a kind of ferocity in his eyes, a characteristic he had only noticed in the Dark Lord. But Potter had NEVER reminded him of the Dark Lord! What was going on? And why was Longbottom glaring at Potter with the same intensity that he used when he was glaring at Draco?

"Malfoy, if you insist on merely staring at me, why don't you just go back to your snake nest?" Harry said flippantly as he made insulting shooing motions for Malfoy to return to the Slytherin table. Malfoy, Neville, Hermione and Ron stared at him in astonishment.

Had Potter just said . . . what Draco THOUGHT he'd said?! But . . . but . . . how the HELL had this Gryffindork gotten the better of him? What was going on with Potter? He was behaving so strangely, he was actually INSULTING him! WITHOUT help from Granger, Weasley or Longbottom! Had he MISSED some vital change in Potter,

like a mind-changing charm of some kind? He glanced at the other Gryffindors and was even more shocked to see them just as confused as he was.

Oh, she KNEW that this was going to be bad! She knew it. She knew it. She KNEW it! How could she have hoped for everything to be the same? How could she have hoped that this problem would go away? Hermione couldn't help feeling guilty about what she had done to Harry, yes, but she was sorry! Wasn't she allowed to get away with this one itty bitty little mistake she had made? She had always been a good student, a good friend, a good daughter so why was her only error blowing up in her face like this?!

"If you'll excuse me, I have an Ancient Runes class I must be present for." With that, Harry stood up and nodded coldly at them before walking out of the Great Hall. He left behind three very confused Gryffindors, an outraged Slytherin and two pairs of sharp, analytical eyes staring at his retreating form, one a normally twinkling blue and the other a deep onyx.

Harry sat in the back of his class, completely ignoring Hermione and desperately trying to hide his embarrassment. The class was going on and on but all Harry could do was sit there. He didn't understand a thing that was going on and to make matters worse, Hermione kept answering the questions and faking modesty whenever the professor gave her points. Had Hermione always been this arrogant? Well, perhaps not ARROGANT, but she certainly WAS annoying when she was trying to be modest. She was smart, that was great and wonderful, but pretending that she was embarrassed about the house points was just annoying.

Now he was stuck in a class that he wouldn't have been in had he been in his home universe. Instead, he would have been with all of his friends in a regular class without having to deal with this constant annoyance. Wait a minute, friends? But hadn't he just discovered how Hermione and Ron actually WERE? But the Hermione and Ron he knew weren't like this!

Or were they?

But no, Hermione wasn't like that! Not Hermione! She was the kindest, sweetest, smartest girl he knew. Hell, he would marry her if she wasn't so much like a sister to him. No, he was just being paranoid with how odd Neville and Ron were behaving. He was stressed. He couldn't handle not knowing about his classes. Usually his classes were hard because he never truly studied but after his fifth year, Harry had begun to realize that a little studying could go a long way. After all, just look at how he had won the First Task in his fourth year using the spell Moody (Barty Crouch Jr. using a Polyjuice Potion) had suggested against the dragon. The irony of the spell having been a Summoning Charm, the spell that had also gotten him into this mess in the first place, was not lost on him. He hated that a Death Eater had made him realize it, but Harry could no longer ignore the fact that he wasn't invincible and the only way to protect himself would be to get a thorough education.

Hell, the only reason he had been able to teach his DA class was because he had studied advanced spells in his fourth year so that he could survive the TriWizard Tournament. He would have to figure out what to do with himself if he was to survive in this universe. He didn't have Dumbledore's protection here and, frankly, he didn't want it after what had happened last year.

The ringing bell shook Harry out of his thoughts and as everyone packed up, he realized guiltily that he hadn't paid one ounce of attention to his class. Really, it had looked rather interesting when the runes had started to glow and change into various spells but without any knowledge of the basics, how exactly was he meant to understand the obviously complicated procedures?

As he walked to his Divination class, he tried to wake himself up a bit to ready his befuddled mind for more derogatory death predictions from the beetle known as Trelawney. Obviously, it didn't work. The fumes almost instantly knocked him out; he had enough time to sit at a table at the back of the room. The only thing that woke him at the end of the class was the genuinely confused tone in Trelawney's worried questions concerning his health. It had been confusing

enough to find out that he had been placed into her advanced course, but to then find out that he was one of her prized pupils. It was just too much.

Dinner was spent quietly in a corner of the Gryffindor table, Harry completely ignoring Ron and Hermione. Neville would glare at him every chance he got, only getting angrier and angrier as he realized that Harry was ignoring him. Harry was staring at his dinner impassively, thinking about how helpless he had felt during Herbology and Ancient Runes. How was he going to be able to continue taking these classes and not draw attention to himself if he was expected to do well? Not even do well, he was expected to excel! Besides, it would be worth it to watch Neville get outshone by "sniveling little Harry Potter". Oh, he couldn't wait to see the looks on their faces!

Leaving the remnants of his dinner where it was, Harry grabbed his bag and left for the library. Hermione's head snapped up worriedly and followed his progress across the Great Hall. She grabbed her bag to follow him but Ron tugged at her sleeve, pulling her back down. He scowled after Harry and hissed, "Let him go if he thinks he's so much better than us. Let him figure out what to do on his own." Hermione stared after Harry anxiously. True, maybe this Harry WOULD be able to figure out what to do on his own, but she had a strange urge to help him. Not in the way she had helped the other Harry but actually HELP this one with more than just her knowledge and pity.

Unbeknownst to everyone else in the Great Hall, those same two pairs of eyes followed Harry just as they had after lunch.

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Chapter Six: Take The Long Road and Walk It

The sun began to descend over the horizon, bathing the library in blood red twilight and making the runes in Harry's book glow. At first, memorizing the basic runes had been tedious and boring. Earth, Water, Wind, Fire and Ice were simple runes to pronounce and write but when he tried to move on to the more difficult spells, he forgot the fundamentals. After the first fifteen minutes (of which he could have learnt three different Defense spells, he kept telling himself bitterly) he was on the brink of scraping the whole idea and ripping the book to pieces.

But the sunset . . . had he ever watched the sunset? He could remember, as a child, staring out of the window during meals with the Dursleys and contemplating the Hogwarts grounds during his first year when he was sure he should have felt some form of homesickness. He couldn't recall the sight or ever noticing how mystical the library looked during the witching hour. Glancing at the runes again, he realized how beautiful THEY were as well. Runes were written spells and he had always thought that spells were beautiful when done correctly. With a new determination, Harry buckled down and tried again to learn the symbols on the gold-tinged pages.

After a while he started to notice that there were patterns in the runes. For example: the runes depicting the simple forms of fire were more curved with sharp edges and the ice spells were rigged and with straight lines. He was just moving on to the second chapter with two runes stringed together when he realized that he was the only person in the library. Glancing at his watch, he nearly had a heart attack as he realized he was ten minutes late for his Remedial Transfiguration class!

Quickly grabbing his book and hauling his back pack over his shoulder, Harry sprinted to the Transfiguration class. He rammed his shoulder against the door and panted as he hurried to his desk. Everyone was staring at him as if he was insane and McGonagall did NOT look pleased.

"MR. POTTER!" She shrieked, looking furious. "You are LATE! Again! AND you have disrupted my class!" Harry bowed his head humbly, making sure she didn't see the slight smile on his face.

"I'm sorry professor, it won't happen again. I was just in the library and I didn't hear the bell." McGonagall still seething, narrowed her eyes to fine points. Everyone in the room took an instinctive step away from Harry and pretended to work on their projects: changing a bird into a cold-blooded creature of the students' choice.

Parvati screamed when her humming bird half changed, two fangs appearing at the end of the bird's fragile beak as the feathers at the end of its tail changed into scales. The humming bird dropped like a stone and made a feeble humming sound as it tried to lift itself. Harry wondered if he would be able to survive this class without laughing himself to death. Lavender wasn't having any better luck, both because her parakeet had grown crocodile teeth and was flapping its wings helplessly and because four scaly legs had torn through its soft belly. McGonagall's attention drifted away from Harry as the poor parakeet began to trill in pain. She left Harry to get the poor bird away from Lavender who kept saying "No, no, I'll fix it!", only making the situation worse.

Suppressing a grin, Harry went to the only empty chair and turned to the raven waiting for him. The jet black bird preened its feathers importantly before looking at Harry with one piercing eye. Harry stared back before lifting his wand and glancing at the board to see the instructions and spell being used.

With a quick flick of the wrist, the raven changed into a black asp with an audible pop. Rearing back, the asp hissed dangerously. "What did you DO to me human?"

"I'm sssorry; I had to complete the lessson." Harry hissed apologetically, lowering his voice so that no one would overhear him speaking in Parseltongue. The raven-made-asp stopped hissing and stared at him with open curiosity.

"You ssspeak like me?" Instantly the asp relaxed and licked the tip of Harry's finger then his wand tip and hissed again. "Your ssskin

tassstes . . . ssstrange. But that ssstick tassstes of darkness. You're one of usss." Harry's eyes widened, as he opened his mouth to protest.

"MR. POTTER!!!" Harry spun around at the horrified shriek, finding McGonagall staring at the asp in absolute terror. "D-don't move! Don't make any sudden movements!" The asp watched curiously as she edged along the desks, lifting her wand shakily.

"What isss that human doing?" The asp asked curiously. Harry looked at McGonagall and tried desperately to keep a straight face. She was so pale and frightened; did she honestly think he was in danger? Harry wouldn't have created something dangerous if he wasn't completely sure he could handle the situation.

"Professor-," Harry started.

"J-just hold still Harry." Had she just used his first name? Wow, she REALLY must have been afraid that the asp would bite him! Holding perfectly still so as not to give her a heart attack, he watched her quickly banish it from sight as she slumped back against the wall in relief. Harry felt guilty about not helping the asp since it HADN'T harmed him and had only moved back into a defensive position because Harry had surprised it. Really, she didn't have to overreact the way she had.

'She only banished it, she didn't actually kill it.' He kept reminding himself mentally. If he didn't, the guilt would have really gotten to him. After all, appearances were often deceiving.

'Draco Malfoy's appearance is deceiving.' A tiny voice in his head whispered faintly. Harry blinked in surprise. Where in the WORLD had that thought come from? He quickly shook it away and went to his desk. Opening his book, he began to read from the Ancient Runes book he had borrowed from the library earlier. McGonagall kept glancing at him oddly all through class.

The next morning Harry got up slowly. He grunted angrily when he remembered the hour after his Transfiguration class. No, no, his REMEDIAL Transfiguration class. Yes, the one in which he had finished FIRST and with no problems at all. AND in which he completed his assignment so quickly that he had nearly an hour to read his library book (which was becoming very interesting).

Flashback

"Harry, what's wrong with you? Why are you acting so . . . so . . . just WEIRD?!" Ron demanded the second he saw Harry. Blinking in shock, Harry stared at Ron and Hermione. They had cornered him the moment he had entered the Common Room. Ron was raving loudly but Harry managed to block him out and instead tried to listen to Hermione since she would probably tell him what had gotten their knickers in a twist.

"The Harry we know is good in his classes. And he's bad in his remedial classes. We heard about your little trick in Transfiguration." The way she said it sounded almost as if Harry had been expected to know this. With all of the self control he had left after hours of grueling humiliation, studying, general uneasiness and home-sickness, Harry just managed not to whip around and kill them both.

"And McGonagall! Even McGonagall was suspicious!" Ron said, waving his arms around for emphasis.

"I was not aware of how I was supposed to -" Harry began through gritted teeth, only to be cut off by Ron's ramblings and Hermione's matter-of-fact argument.

"An ASP! You conjured a bloody asp!" Ron said in the background, and was ignored.

"Isn't it OBVIOUS? Why would he be in those remedial classes if he was GOOD at them?" Harry hadn't thought of that but he wasn't about to tell Hermione this. He scowled and even drew back his lip slightly in a sneer.

"Funny, I thought YOU were going to tell me what to do in this universe since, you know, YOU were the one that got me into this fucking Hell hole in the first place." Ron and Hermione both stopped talking at the same time. Had he just

"H-Harry?" Hermione whispered worriedly.

"NO, I'm bloody sick and tired of this. First, you summon me to this damned place where my ENTIRE world is turned upside down. THEN, you think that you have the RIGHT to tell me what the HELL I can do with MY life, telling me how I'M supposed to act and what I'M supposed to do. Well you know what? Fuck off. I don't care anymore. Just leave me alone alright? I'm dangerous when I'm angry. And you've pushed me to pissed off." With that, Harry ran up to his dorm room leaving behind two astonished Gryffindors. The moment the door slammed shut, a statue of a griffin exploded, making Ron and Hermione turn to stare at it. They shared an alarmed look.

Had Harry done that?

The person in both startled Gryffindor's minds, meanwhile, hadn't heard a thing as he slipped under the covers of his bed and burrowed into them, feeling strangely satisfied.

End Flashback

Charms and Care of Magical Creatures weren't hard classes to deal with in regards to keeping his magical abilities cloaked. In Charms, the class was learning banishing charms (a charm Harry had already mastered but which Harry carefully took a long time to relearn). Most of the time, he either pretended to let his mind wander while actually listening or he would read from his Ancient Runes book. Now that he was getting into it, all of his other classes seemed duller.

Care of Magical Creatures, a class in which Harry had thought would be normal for once, ended up shocking him as much as his other classes. Where was Hagrid? Why was this Grubby-Plank woman back? Perhaps Hagrid was still on his mission for Dumbledore with the Giants in this universe, at least, he HOPED so. The professor shocked him further by bringing in a Chimera for their lesson. He had

thought this woman only brought harmless animals in for her classes. He held back a sneer when he thought of the awed looks and cooing noises the girls had made when she had brought the Unicorns to class in his second year.

Harry shook himself out of his thoughts and tried to concentrate on the lesson.

The creature was the size of a small pony with the body of a lion, a matching head, a goat's head sticking out of its back with cloved hooves and the tail of a serpent. Harry forced himself not to laugh as he listened to the snake obviously fighting with the other two heads over who should eat how many mortals. Since he missed two thirds of the conversation, he resolved to just watch it curiously like everyone else.

By Thursday he was finally getting used to his new routine. Go to class, act dumb, read his book, be nice and quiet. Oh, and ignore Ron and Hermione. Really, his other self seemed to do this as well so why shouldn't he take the gift he'd been given? After all, it wasn't as if Ron or Hermione had made any attempts to approach him. That night, Harry glanced down at his schedule and let out a defeated sigh. Potions. WHY could he never be rid of this class? It seemed to follow him wherever he went.

Walking down the winding staircases leading to the dungeons, Harry felt a chill go up his spine. It wasn't that there was something scary in the corridor (there were few things in the world that scared Harry anymore) but it WAS an ominous kind of feeling. Something was going to happen but he wasn't quite sure what it was just yet. Was there another Death Eater (aside from Snape) in the school, staring at him, somehow knowing his secret? He casually looked around but there was no one there that he didn't recognize as a student or a ghost. He couldn't pin point the feeling, but it seemed as though someone were trying to push at the edges of his mind.

When he arrived in the dungeons, he wasn't too surprised to find that Snape completely disregarded his presence. It was odd: to see Snape more occupied with scowling at Neville than scaring Harry into doing badly in his potion. Without really noticing what Potion he was

doing, Harry allowed himself to do as well as he always did in this class (which really wasn't all that great since Snape WAS there to distract him). Gradually he began to watch Snape and Neville, both of whom seemed to be different and yet the same.

This Neville still made his cauldrons explode, though he managed to laugh charmingly and wink at the girls in the classroom with green gunk still sticking to his scalp. Shaking his head, Harry turned slightly to stare at Snape. The Potions Master had been one of the chief sources of misery in Harry's life but also the origin of quite a lot of curiosity. Snape had gone to school with his parents and he had heard so much about his father (some controversial things) but he had heard nearly nothing about his mother. And Snape had always seemed to have been a mind reader (something that had been proven because of their failed Occlumency classes).

Severus kept getting the feeling that he was being stared at. Glancing at Potter, he was surprised to see powerful green eyes staring into his not with hatred or fear but with calculating curiosity. Those eyes . . . he hadn't seen eyes like those since Lily. With a start, Severus realized that he had been staring into Potter's eyes for far too long. He refrained from grinning maliciously as an idea struck him. He narrowed his eyes, attempting to push gently into Potter's mind and extract any emotions or thoughts.

It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall. His body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backward through the ragged veil hanging from the arch. . . .

Harry saw the look of mingled fear and surprise on his godfather's wasted, once-handsome face as he fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which flittered for a moment as though in a high wind and then fell back into place.

Harry heard Bellatrix Lestrange's triumphant scream, but knew it meant nothing - Sirius had only just fallen through the archway, he would reappear from the other side any second. . . .

But Sirius did not reappear.

"SIRIUS!" Harry yelled, "SIRIUS!"

He had reached the floor, his breath coming in searing gasps. Sirius must be just behind the curtain, he, Harry, would pull him back out again. . . .

But as he reached the ground and sprinted toward the dais, Lupin grabbed Harry around the chest, holding him back.

"There's nothing you can do, Harry -"

"We have to get him, save him; he's only just gone through!"

"It's too late, Harry -"

"It's NOT too late. We can still reach him -"

Harry struggled hard, viciously, but Lupin would not let go. . . .

"There's nothing you can do, Harry . . . nothing. . . . He's gone."
Lupin's soft, broken voice...

Severus was suddenly shoved violently out of Harry's mind and actually fell over a cauldron, looking shocked. With his furious green eyes burning into Snape's, Harry grabbed his bag and left the dungeons at a run. Everyone stared from the slammed door to Snape's disheveled form, still on the floor, staring in absolute shock after Harry.

Had he just seen . . . ? Hurriedly climbing to his feet, Severus ran to the Headmaster's office.

If Harry's first two classes on Friday had not been Astronomy and Divination, he probably would have gone mad. He needed to think. Had Snape seen what he had been thinking about? Had he watched Sirius die just as Harry watched him die every night or had he perhaps seen some other, more trivial aspect of his past such as his winning the house cup? Maybe he had seen Cedric's death or Voldemort or his parents' echoes or his date with Cho or doing homework with Ron and Hermione or . . . well, he could have seen anything! All that Harry knew was that the familiar sensation of Snape being in his mind had terrified him.

Not to mention pissed him off like hell.

By the time he had Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry had sufficiently calmed down. After all, if Snape had really suspected something, Aurors, Dumbledore and/or Death Eaters would have been after him by lunch time. The point was that by the time Harry got into the familiar Defense classroom, he received a nasty shock to discover Mrs. Figg sitting behind the teacher's desk with a slightly nervous look on her face. She cleared her throat and waved her hand slightly to gather the students' fraying attention.

As much as he had grown to like the woman, Harry couldn't help admitting that the class was very boring. They had to read for the entire class period about Chimeras (creatures which he had already dealt with in Care of Magical Creatures) and a chapter he had already read. Harry spent some of the time reading from his Ancient Runes book, which he kept on his lap under the table.

All in all, the week had been stressful, enlightening, boring and eventful.

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Chapter Seven: Intolerable Cruelty

How had Harry Potter seen Sirius Black's death? How HAD Sirius Black died? As far as Severus knew, Black was alive and . . . not quite WELL, but he was alive! And Lupin had been there too and had spoken to Potter as if he knew the boy well, which he didn't. Again, Severus hadn't thought that Potter had even MET Lupin.

Hurrying down the Hogwarts corridors, he kept trying to find some kind of clue as to why Potter would be acting so strangely. True, the boy had come back early from his trip to Ms. Ann Pettigrew's house (Potter oh so loved seeing his "Mummy Ann") but that certainly didn't have to mean anything. This Potter seemed to have an entirely different personality, a different way of holding himself; he even had the same eyes as Lily! In all the years that Severus had known Harry Potter, those bloody eyes of his had been the same color as Severus' best friend but only now had they blazed with the same anger and passion that had been so prominent in Lily Evans. Even now he hated to think of her as Lily Potter. She was Lily EVANS. Period.

Searing, blinding pain shot up Severus' left arm and stopped him only feet away from the Headmaster's office. 'NO!' Severus hissed in his own mind as he tugged his sleeve up slightly to stare at the burning mark on his left forearm. 'Not now, WHY couldn't the bastard wait until tomorrow?' Severus cursed mentally as he drew his cloak around himself imperiously and stormed down the hallway, making a group of first years leap out of his way as he hurried out of the school grounds and stealthily into the Forbidden Forest.

Looking around carefully until he felt the wards of the school far behind him, Severus transformed a fallen branch into a portkey and appeared before the Riddle House with a loud pop. All around him Death Eaters were swarming at the doors but only those of the Inner Circle were being allowed entrance. He caught a glimpse of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange entering the mansion as McNair and Nott stared after them. Straightening his cloak and fixing his most piercing scowl onto his face, Severus made his way into the mansion, ignoring the Death Eaters moving aside to give him room.

As he entered the meeting room, he was surprised to find the Dark Lord speaking with Lucius Malfoy in hushed whispers. Normally, the Dark Lord a) did not publicly converse with his Death Eaters in anything less than a clear voice for all to hear and b) the people he usually went to for information were lower level spies rather than members of his Inner Circle. As Severus turned his head, he was also surprised to find Peter Pettigrew looking around confusedly. Usually he reserved that rabbit-caught-by-a-snake look for when he was told that he would be tortured. Had the blubbering fool fouled up AGAIN?

Severus walked towards the back of the room beside Lestrangle and waited for the meeting to begin. Malfoy walked over from their Master's throne and stood beside him, smirking.

"What's going on?" Severus muttered, barely moving his lips. Malfoy turned to him and chuckled smugly.

"We found a spy." Severus' lip twitched but otherwise he remained emotionless. Inwardly his emotions were swimming.

'God, HOW had they found out? Had I given myself away? Had Malfoy found out or had someone in the Order slipped?' His thoughts continued to race as he turned to Malfoy calmly. "Who is it then?"

"Baddock." Malfoy said smugly. "I caught her talking to McGonagall about the Order of the Phoenix when she supposedly came to see her son."

"Malcolm Baddock's mother?" A second year Slytherin boy flashed into Severus' mind. He'd never known that his student's mother was a spy just as Severus himself was.

"Yes. It's too bad; he would have made an excellent Death Eater." Malfoy mused thoughtfully.

Inwardly, Severus was relieved that he hadn't been caught. A noble man would have been glad that he wasn't caught so that the other members of the Order could remain safe. But Severus was NOT a noble man. He owed the Headmaster a favor, it was true, but

Severus was actually relieved because he'd saved his own hide. True, he (grudgingly) cared for some of his students, but at the moment his heart was pounding because of the near- death experience HE had almost faced.

Lestrangle had been listening closely to the conversation and her face broke out into an evil smirk when Severus turned to her. For a moment he wondered if SHE knew his secret, but something told him that she didn't know. She was smug about something ELSE that concerned Severus but probably didn't have anything to do with him directly.

"Severus," the Dark Lord hissed in a soft, seductive voice. Severus' head shot up at being addressed so quickly but he moved forward to kneel before his Master.

"Yes my Lord?" Severus said in his most submissive, emotionless voice. He bowed his head down humbly and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robes before straightening back into a kneeling position.

"I have a deed that you must complete. A traitor has been found within our midst and I want you to punish her." Severus hated the last word. 'Her.' He could kill any man, innocent or otherwise without qualms but he hated, absolutely HATED to harm women or children. Young girls were the worst really, with those doe-like eyes and their lower lip trembling, begging to know what they could have done to save themselves. Some offered their own bodies to him; others put a hand over their robes instinctively. He always tried to make their deaths swift and painless.

Mrs. Baddock was dragged out of another room, her left eye swollen shut, her upper lip cut and her body trembling from excessive use of the Cruciatus Curse. Her mousy brown hair was escaping the bun she'd probably worn before the Death Eaters captured her but she lifted her head defiantly and even spat at the Dark Lord.

"Go to Hell!" She screamed hoarsely. The other Death Eaters chuckled but the Dark Lord merely tilted his head in amusement, like a snake sizing up a juicy new rabbit. Severus wished to look away in disgust and tell the Dark Lord he really SHOULD go to Hell and to

make some OTHER lackey do his dirty work for him, but he knew he would be killed for his insolence. And much as he hated it, he would rather kill a woman than be killed himself. Cowardly? Perhaps, but he had honed his self-preservation skills to a point that he no longer had to think about his decisions anymore. Well, not when it was either his life or one that was of no real importance.

"Avada-," Severus started as he drew out his wand.

"No, Severus. I said PUNISH, not KILL. I want you to PUNISH her for what she's done." Severus felt like screaming, 'Why don't you just bloody do it yourself, you heartless bastard?!' but again, that self-preserving instinct in him kept his expression blank as he nodded respectfully.

"Of course my Lord." He heard himself say mechanically. HOW many times had he said this? A million? Did it matter anymore? Baddock looked up at him with recognition in her eyes; she KNEW that he was a spy as well. And she also knew she wasn't going to be saved. She put a knowing sneer on her face.

"Well what are you waiting for Snape? Or don't you have the guts hmm?" Severus inwardly thanked her for hitting his pride (being shown as less than perfect in front of the Dark Lord) and that same damnable self-preserving instinct took hold of his hand.

"Crucio!" He stated firmly. She began to writhe in pain, shrieking inhumanely as those cocky, knowing eyes filled with pain; with that same doe-look that broke Severus' cold heart every time he saw it. He tried to imagine someone else's face on hers; perhaps James Potter's or Sirius Black's . . . a flash of a memory caught his attention as he continued to torture Baddock.

"SIRIUS!" Harry yelled, "SIRIUS!"

Severus jerked his wand back, eyes slightly narrowed as he recalled the memory he had teased out of the Potter boy's mind. How was it possible? He would have to check with Lestrage to see if Black had somehow broken out of Azkaban. But how could the Potter boy know about Black? After all, he was incarcerated for the murder of a street

full of Muggles and Pettigrew (no one of course, knew that Pettigrew was still alive). But the way that Potter had screamed for Black . . . it was almost as if he were losing a family member.

Voldemort hissed with satisfaction. The spy was dead: tortured to the point that her pain was her end. Her heart had stopped, eyes glazed as they stared up at the ceiling lifelessly. Now the only thing to do was kill the child, Malcolm Baddock. That or recruit him into the league of Death Eaters before he contemplated revenge against Voldemort. Severus had done well; he had nearly expected his prized Death Eater to refuse torturing the woman. He knew, of course, how Severus loathed harming women and children, but when given a direct order he always followed it, even when he hated it so.

"Massster?" Nagini, his only truly faithful fighter, slithered up his leg to rest her jeweled emerald head on his lap. "Massster, I sssmell fresssh blood." Voldemort chuckled lightly and patted Nagini's head, making the large serpent hiss contently and nuzzle his hand.

'How she loves serving her Master', Voldemort thought. "Feassst then my dear. The traitor'sss blood iss yoursss." Nagini lightly flicked her tongue over his fingers before slithering towards the dead body. Severus continued staring at it with a coldly calculating look. Really, Voldemort was impressed that Severus could continue to stare at the woman as she was slowly devoured by Nagini. After all, she wasn't very neat with her food.

"And now, on to the next order of business," the Dark Lord hissed, turning his blood red eyes towards the rat. The man made a small squeaking noise in the back of his throat before composing himself enough to dash to the Dark Lord's feet and kiss the hem of his robes reverently.

"Y-Yes M-Master?" Pettigrew wheezed, looking hopeful.

"Why haven't you killed that retched Potter boy yet?" The Dark Lord hissed. Pettigrew's head shot up, his mouth dropping open slightly.

"W-What are you talking about my Lord? I killed him! I watched him burn!" Pettigrew whimpered desperately, looking confused.

"Pettigrew, I've just had Potter in my Remedial Potion's class, the boy is alive and quite well." Severus whispered coldly, lifting his head to scowl at Pettigrew just as Nagini made off with Baddock's body snugly trapped inside her massive stomach.

"That's impossible!" Pettigrew cried indignantly. He HAD killed Potter! He had taken great pleasure in torturing the boy and then soundly killing him. He had watched his filthy carcass burn and had put the ashes into a small jar that he took with him everywhere . . . the jar! Peter began to fumble in his robes before producing the jar. "Here! I gathered up his ashes, I DID kill him!"

Lestrangle snatched the jar from Pettigrew, looking into it curiously before shrugging. "Perhaps these ARE human ashes, but perhaps they're nothing more than the death of a camp fire. I'll have to perform some spells to see if the blubbering fool is telling the truth." The Dark Lord nodded his assent.

"In the meantime, Severus, keep a close watch on Harry Potter." Severus bowed respectfully though inwardly he sneered. Now he was stuck babysitting a crying, sniveling little Gryffindor. Just great. "As for you Wormtail . . . in case you have contemplated escape without punishment, I believe the entire mess with Potter should be enough reason for punishment. Bellatrix?" Lestrangle eagerly stepped forward, wand in hand.

"N-No wait! I-I did my mission! I killed him; you've got to believe me!"

"Crucio!"

Severus watched as the spineless man before him shrieked and writhed in pain, twisting his body at odd angles to try to escape the pain. In the back of his mind, Severus WAS going to start watching Potter. The boy had more secrets than anyone could have ever guessed.

Author's Note: thank you to Vicious Lily, Jessi Malfoy, jasen, Laterose, lime and Ashlee. Thank you all so much for your support! Rose69 and I appreciate it so much and please, by all means, tell us how

we're doing and which parts you like. If something confuses you please read the Author's Notes or even e-mail me. Also, if this chapter wasn't all that great, blame me. I'm currently sick and slightly delusional so enjoy!

Chapter Eight: I Wish I Didn't Miss You

"The Harry WE know would never know about that spell!"

"The Harry WE know would never understand that spell's magical theory!"

"The Harry WE know would walk right into the trick step!"

"The Harry WE know wouldn't have talked to Malfoy like that!"

By the end of the week, Harry was prepared to scream. Well, he was going to strangle Ron and Hermione first and then he was going to scream. He didn't think that he could take anymore of their bitching and whining about him doing too well in a class. Honestly, he was only human! What did they expect him to do: suddenly become the other Harry and let them live their happy little lives without worrying an ounce about him? They got him into this mess! HE'D done nothing wrong!

Hermione was extremely worried about the behavior that Harry was displaying in his classes. Did he WANT to get them all into trouble? The teachers were going to notice if Harry was acting so differently! Professor Snape and Malfoy were already giving him suspicious looks. They knew something was going on and they were the WRONG people to make suspicious! Neville was suspicious, Hell, EVERYONE was suspicious! She wouldn't be surprised if one day during breakfast Aurors would come and lock her into Azkaban along with Sirius Black, James and Lily Potter!

Ron couldn't believe this. Before this Harry had come along, HE had been the one protecting first and second years from Malfoy! HE had been the one, along with Neville, who had been making sure that no one was being bothered by the bratty Slytherin git! Now he was being shoved into the background as Harry kept coming between a fight and calmly, coldly, quickly solving the problem with a few scathing comments. The first years now looked at Harry as if he was some kind of god. The world had suddenly been turned upside-down!

"The Harry WE know-," Ron began as usual after Harry finally got back from his remedial Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Harry was tired from a long week of working hard to make everyone happy and those first four words were the last ones he ever wanted to hear. EVER again.

"I don't bloody CARE what the Harry YOU know does! I am my own person! I will NOT allow you to boss me around anymore. If I decide I'm going to walk into the Great Hall tomorrow without any clothes on with my hair on fire, I'll bloody well do it! I don't give a rat's ass if YOUR Harry would never do that!" Harry bellowed.

Ron and Hermione took a moment to absorb this latest outburst from Harry. They still were not accustomed to this Harry doing anything but whining. This Harry seemed to have enough patience to fill an ocean but when he lost his temper, he was the most terrifying individual either had ever met. And for some strange reason, this Harry seemed to be getting angry very often. But it COULDN'T be because of them! They were just trying to HELP.

"Harry really," Hermione started, a note of impatience in her voice, "we're only trying to keep people from realizing who you are." Hermione searched her bag for a quill, looking at him distractedly.

"MYSELF?!" Harry growled through clenched teeth. Hermione waved her hand dismissively in the same way that Ron did every time Harry began to yell at him. If they kept doing this to him he was going to scream. He didn't think he could take their constant nagging anymore, especially with the added annoyance of them pushing at his emotions as if he was some kind of machine.

"That's not what she meant." Ron cut in quickly. "What she means is that you're acting too conspicuous." Hermione turned to look at Ron in awe. Harry as well turned to look at Ron as if he'd grown another head.

"How did you learn that word?" Ron blushed and scowled at her. Both Harry and Hermione wondered how he could have possibly said that word without choking on it.

"I heard Fred and George say it once. But that's not the point! The point is that you're going to get us into a lot of trouble if you keep going around doing all of these things that'll bring attention to you." Harry sighed and stood up straight, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Ron, Hermione, I can't change my personality anymore than either of you can change yours." Harry interjected calmly.

"What are you TALKING about Harry? We could easily do this SO much better than you." Hermione said indignantly, puffing out her chest slightly.

"You could give up studying altogether, failing all of your classes and begin acting like a complete coward?" Harry sneered. Hermione turned slightly red as she thought about it. In the back of her mind she knew that she could never give all of that up, especially her books. But Harry was exaggerating! He had to be! It wasn't nearly as bad as he made it out to be!

"Come off it Harry, it's not NEARLY that hard to act dumb!" Ron said. Harry turned a cold glare on Ron.

"Unlike you, in MY dimension I am NOT known for being a moron." Harry said snidely as Ron opened his mouth in outrage. "Could YOU suddenly start studying and knowing every single one of your classes like the back of your hand within two days?" This brought Ron up short. No . . . he didn't think he could . . . but Harry had it easy! Ron would love to act dumb in his classes!

"Harry, stop being so nasty! We're just trying to help!" Hermione tried again. This conversation wasn't going the way she wanted it to at ALL. She was accustomed to telling people like Ron and Harry what to do. Much as she kept telling herself that wasn't the reason she didn't like this Harry, he just thought too much for her liking. Opposing her strict rules and so forth. Nothing like the Harry she knew.

"I've had quite enough of your help." Harry said curtly as he walked up to his dorm and closed the door before they could yell anything after him. Ron plopped into one of the overstuffed red sofas and growled in frustration.

"This is just great! What's HIS problem anyway? Try to give the guy just a LITTLE help and he blows up in your face! Honestly, it's not as hard as he keeps saying it is!" Ron said, winding up for one of his long rants.

"He's not what I'm really worried about right now." Hermione confided. She sat in one of the chairs closest to the fire and played with the hem of her robes thoughtfully. Ron stared at her incredulously.

"How could he NOT be our major priority right now?" Really, was Hermione going mad or something? They could be expelled! They could be imprisoned! They could. . . could. . . ANYTHING! And Hermione was thinking of other things besides trying to keep Harry in line and make sure nothing odd happened to him? Did she WANT them to get into trouble?

"Ron, I've been thinking . . . don't you think it's even a bit strange that Harry hasn't come back from his trip to see his mum?" Hermione said as she looked at him. Ron blinked stupidly.

"Huh?" He said intelligently. Hermione sighed and rubbed her temples. Really, when was Ron going to stop being so thick and realize things did not revolve around him? He needed to think more clearly! This was pathetic, even for him!

"The Harry of OUR universe. Haven't you wondered why he hasn't come back from his trip yet?" Hermione said, slightly annoyed. Ron blinked again.

"Oh right, him. Well, maybe he got homesick and wanted to stay for a bit longer is all." He waved his hand dismissively and glared at his backpack. He did NOT want to do his homework, he really didn't want to.

"Oh come ON Ron! It's been an awfully long time for him to be gone to see his mum. You know how she is about him being with friends and getting good grades. She wants him to be a professional Herbologist after all and she can't have him be THAT if he keeps missing school." Ron glanced at her distractedly.

"What's your point Hermione?" He said.

"My POINT, Ron, is where IS he?" This stopped them both short and they slowly turned to stare at each other.

"Now that you mention it . . . where COULD he be?" Ron asked, gratefully ignoring his homework. Hermione sat back and stared into the fire thoughtfully.

"Well, it couldn't be that he's still at home, his mum would have gotten a letter from Hogwarts when Harry jinxed Malfoy. You know, it really wasn't smart to jump on him. Now I see why." Ron waved his hand dismissively again.

"Forget about that, back to where the Harry we know is. How can we find him? Do you know some tracking spell or something?" Hermione blushed slightly.

"Ron, do you really think it's a good idea for me to start looking for spells we shouldn't be using again?" Ron smiled in embarrassment.

"Oh right. Sorry. Okay, so what can we do? We can't ask anyone or they'll know what's going on. And as much as this Harry is a prat, he's actually kind of interesting in this annoying. . . dark way." Hermione nodded.

"It's almost like he's a Slytherin in Gryffindor." Hermione and Ron both shuddered at this thought.

"No way! Come on Hermione, that could never happen!" Ron said, moving the pieces around his second hand chess set carefully. "Care for a game?"

"But Ron, what about the other Harry? The one that hasn't come back yet?"

"You said it yourself Hermione, what can we do about it?"

Severus sat in his office staring into the pensieve that should have contained the memories of his latest Death Eater meeting to be discussed with the Headmaster. But he just couldn't bring himself to share this information with the old man.

He still wasn't entirely sure if his decision not to tell Headmaster about his suspicions had been a good one. After all, he COULD have quite the predicament in his hands if the Headmaster suspected something and Severus didn't tell him anything.

However, his memories of the past would not allow thoughts concerning the Headmaster to remain for long.

Pink soap bubbles streamed from Snape's mouth at once; the froth was covering his lips, making him gag, choking him -

"Leave him ALONE!"

James and Sirius looked around. James's free hand jumped to his hair again.

It was one of the girls from the lake edge. She had thick, dark red hair that fell to her shoulders and startlingly green almond-shaped eyes - Harry's eyes.

Harry's mother . . .

"All right, Evans?" said James, and the tone of his voice was suddenly pleasant, deeper, more mature.

"Leave him alone," Lily repeated. She was looking at James with every sign of great dislike. "What's he done to you?"

"Well," said James, appearing to deliberate the point, "it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean. . . ."

Many of the surrounding watchers laughed, Sirius and Wormtail included, but Lupin, still apparently intent on his book, didn't, and neither did Lily.

"You think you're funny," she said coldly. "But you're just an arrogant, bullying toe rag, Potter. Leave him alone."

"I will if you go out with me, Evans," said James quickly. "Go on . . . Go out with me, and I'll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again."

Behind him, the Impediment Jinx was wearing off. Snape was beginning to inch toward his fallen wand, spitting out soapsuds as he crawled.

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid," said Lily.

"Bad luck, Prongs," said Sirius briskly, turning back to Snape. "OY!"

But too late; Snape had directed his wand straight at James; there was a flash of light and a gash appeared on the side of James's face, spattering his robes with blood. James whirled about; a second flash of light later, Snape was hanging upside down in the air, his robes falling over his head to reveal skinny, pallid legs and a pair of graying underpants.

Many people in the small crowd watching cheered. Sirius, James, and Wormtail roared with laughter.

Lily, whose furious expression had twitched for an instant as though she was going to smile, said, "Let him down!"

"Certainly," said James and he jerked his wand upward. Snape fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Disentangling himself from his robes, he got quickly to his feet, wand up, but Sirius said, "Locomotor mortis!" and Snape keeled over again at once, rigid as a board.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted. She had her own wand out now. James and Sirius eyed it warily.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," said James earnestly.

"Take the curse off him, then!"

James sighed deeply, then turned to Snape and muttered the counter curse.

"There you go," he said, as Snape struggled to his feet again, "you're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus -"

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

Lily blinked. "Fine," she said coolly. "I won't bother in future. And I'd wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus."

"Apologize to Evans!" James roared at Snape, his wand pointed threateningly at him.

"I don't want you to make him apologize," Lily shouted, rounding on James. "You're as bad as he is. . . ."

"What?" yelped James. "I'd NEVER call you a - you-know-what!"

"Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just got off your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK."

She turned on her heel and hurried away.

"Evans!" James shouted after her, "Hey, EVANS!"

But she didn't look back.

Severus easily remembered the intense embarrassment of that moment and could just as easily remember what had happened afterwards.

Flashback

He had slowly calmed the moment he had entered the library. Sitting for a while, he had realized something. Something that made his blood turn cold.

Lily stormed into the library a few minutes later looking furious. Severus immediately grabbed her arm and hurried her to a quiet area in the back shelves. No one ever went to research flobberworms so they were in no danger of being discovered.

"Lily, I'm SO sorry I called you a Mudblood! I'm sorry! Please forgive me!" Severus said, looking at her pleadingly. Lily stared at him first in surprise then scowled at him.

"I have half a mind to ignore you for the rest of the day." She said sharply, giving him that look she only gave Potter. Severus found himself becoming more desperate.

"Lily PLEASE! I was so mad at them! You KNOW I didn't mean any of the things I said to you! They were just . . . you know they would have thought it was odd if I didn't say something like that! I know calling you that was a bit extreme but . . . jeez I'm SO sorry! Please forgive me! I-I'll buy you all the chocolate in Honeydukes if you'll just forgive me PLEASE! I'll do anything just PLEASE don't be mad at me anymore."

Lily watched him groveling and her lip twitched in amusement though she was careful not to let him notice. He finally stopped and gave her his most pitiful, pleading look. He knew that Lily couldn't take it.

"Oh fine! But I'm warning you Severus, you had BETTER not call me that again!" Then she took him by surprise when she hugged him tightly and walked back to her table calmly. Severus just stared after her with a dumb look on his face. She was constantly surprising him.

End Flashback

Severus was snapped out of his memories sharply.

Lily. Lily's son. Potter.

The only problem with doing anything at all was that Potter was a wildcard. He seemed so much more like Lily in the last week. For now, he would have to wait.

Author's Note: Thanks go to Vicious Lily, rogue, Jessi Malfoy, Szihuoko, lime, Newt, Flame's Guardian, Laterose, Lady Shang, anonymous, Jasen, Aerospace, Yih, Olivia Wood and Ankalagon. Thank you all so much for your support and your helpful advice! Rose69 and I appreciate it so much and please, by all means, tell us how we're doing and which parts you like. If something confuses you please read the Author's Notes or even e-mail me.

Chapter Nine: Rising Out of the Ashes

Eyes narrowed in concentration, Bellatrix carefully sprinkled a shimmering green dust over the jar of ashes. She raised her eyebrows thoughtfully when the dust turned red and then pitch black. Putting down the vial with the remaining green powder, she nodded to herself.

"Well, whoever these ashes belonged to, he or she bled red. That means the little rat actually killed SOMETHING; something at least a bit large judging from the quantity of ashes." She snorted to herself. "I don't doubt he got down on his grubby little paws and picked up every flake of ash." Looking back at the ashes, she shrugged and pulled her dragon hide gloves tighter on her hands.

She wasn't upset about the master allowing her to test the ashes, oh no, but she WAS nervous because today was Halloween, her time limit was up, and she had wasted her time visiting with her sister Narcissa and her husband. Great man, her brother-in-law. He was always impeccably dressed and eloquent in his speech and behavior. Bellatrix's nephew, Draco, was nearly a mirror-image of his father though the boy would have to rely on his own wits instead of barking out threats. His bodyguards and his father would no longer be there to protect him if an Auror or even the Dark Lord chose to end his life. He was too much like Narcissa for Bellatrix's own peace of mind.

Shaking her head to clear it, Bellatrix glared at the ashes and scribbled a few hasty notes on a piece of parchment. If she continued putting this off, midnight would come sooner than she wished. And the punishment for making the Master wait was severe. Besides the pain, Bellatrix had to maintain her perfect record. Whatever she said she could do, she WOULD do, no matter how unpleasant or how much she hated herself for it later. This was the reason she had risen among the other Death Eaters as a prime example of where persevering ambitions led those loyal to the Dark Lord. And she WAS loyal to him.

How could she not be? He had taken her in, taught her all of the most powerful spells she knew, and he rewarded her grandly for all of the work she did. And she did a lot of work. Most Death Eaters did

nothing but sit on their behinds but SHE did the dirty work, killing important Aurors and such. That was how she had ended up getting sent to Azkaban in the first place. That damned Moody had trapped her when she had wasted nearly all of her energy killing one of the finest combatants of the light side. But enough of that, she would be brutally punished if she didn't get to work on the ashes.

Shaking a vial with a obscure purple liquid with gray clumps floating around inside, Bellatrix smashed the piece of glass sharply on top of the jar and watched as the glass began to disperse but then came back together into the shape of the vial again, the liquid having turned completely solid and a bright crimson. "So, it was a mammal. That was a simple matter of deduction; birds couldn't grow to be THIS large. At least, none around here." She muttered to herself as she wrote down a few quick notes. She wasn't ruling out humans, it was just hard for her to believe that the ashes HAD been from a human. After all, Wormtail held the record for the least missions completed successfully; he just happened to get the biggest and most important ones done well.

The next part required the use of two spells at once so Bellatrix cracked her knuckles before carefully lifting two large vials and placing them over the jar. "One . . . two . . . three!" She dropped both onto the jar and watched it all dissolve: glass, potions and all; and drop onto the ashes. Everything turned completely purple for five seconds before the top of the jar and the potions completely vanished, leaving an open glass container with the ashes inside exactly as they had been moments before.

"Well, it's human." Bellatrix muttered. Privately, she was very surprised. The little rat had actually done something right for once? Interesting, she would have to make sure she didn't foul up with this last bit of the procedure or she would be in quite the predicament. It was nearly time for her to report to Voldemort with her findings . . . and there was only one test left to complete her work.

Shifting to skim the various vials still waiting for her use, she placed three hastily beside the ashes and rummaged for a few at the very back of the closet. As she did this, her elbow jerked back and knocked two of the vials into the jar. She screamed as the entire table

exploded. She quickly put her hands to her eyes but it was too late; she could feel them smoldering, she could feel the searing burn of her flesh, the taste of ultimate non-existence, the heart of the flame.

She shrieked in pain and tried to claw at her eyes, blinking desperately as she managed to stumble to the window sill. She crashed against the glass, making it shatter. Snow and wind rushed into the room and all of the ash from the explosion immediately made a small tornado in the center of the room before being swept out into the world. Bellatrix desperately grabbed at the snow on the ledge, shoving it into her eyes in her desperation to feel relief from the fire.

Power surged through the ashes as they spread thinner and thinner, melding with the wind, being dragged towards Hogwarts. Bellatrix would never know why her eyes burned for three long weeks.

Harry glared at the window as he sat in his History of Magic class. He'd had a terrible headache since lunch but it had gotten dramatically worse when he had arrived in Binns' classroom. Double History of Magic. If he had to deal with this every week, he might very well kill himself. No matter how hard he tried to pay attention, he just could NOT bear to listen to Binns for more than two minutes. And that was on good days. In the morning, he instantly fell asleep the moment he arrived at the class.

He continued rubbing his temples, moaning softly in pain. Much as he wanted to fall asleep, the pounding in his forehead refused to lessen even a little. He felt as if the pain would never go away.

The bell rang shrilly, causing the pounding in his head to intensify further as Harry gathered his books sluggishly and dragged his feet as he walked to the Great Hall for dinner. He sat there for nearly an hour just staring at his plate, gently massaging his temples. He wanted to eat, he wanted to sleep, but the pain refused to let him. If he ate he knew that he was going to throw it all up.

Before he had time to collect himself he remembered that he had REMEDIAL potions now. Really, the last thing he needed right now was a class in Snape's drafty dungeon, trapped under his calculating gaze for an hour and a half. Why couldn't everyone just leave him in peace for say, oh, a decade or two?

As usual, Ron and Hermione (Hermione only tagging along to make sure her "experiment" did get out of line) followed after Neville as the pompous git made his way into the Potion's room as if he owned the place. Harry held back a contemptuous snort. As if this Neville were any better in Potions than the Neville of his universe. If anything he was worse because he was far too busy smiling "charmingly" at the girls in the class to pay even the amount of attention his Neville could while cowering under Snape's glare.

"Today, we'll see which of you has enough brains in those thick skulls of yours to make a remedy for the Draught of the Living Death. And since most of you little brats are likely to screw this up, I'll be monitoring your pathetic attempt at this potion very closely." Snape began, his eyes gleaming with sinister delight.

Harry tried to keep his eyes open but the stress of the day so far in addition to the knowledge of Snape's cruel intentions only made his headache worsen; he couldn't keep a soft groan from escaping his lips. Ron looked at him fearfully but didn't seem to think Harry's pain was intense enough for his consideration.

"For now, you and your partner of my choice," there was a collective groan around the room, "will make the potion following my instructions carefully." Snape tapped the chalkboard with his wand and the instructions and ingredients appeared. "You will receive further instructions once you finish." Harry rubbed his temples yet again and nearly had a heart attack when Neville came over and sat beside him. No, this could NOT be happening to him! He could NOT be partnered with Neville today of all days!

"So, happy to be working with the Boy Who Lived?" Neville asked, smirking slightly. Harry groaned inwardly and shifted away from Neville.

"I'm sure you are."

"Huh?"

"Nothing, let's just get this over with." Harry walked to the storage cabinet with the other students and gathered the ingredients needed. Returning to his seat, Harry noticed that Neville already seemed to be confused about something. The cauldron didn't contain enough of the base ingredient yet and Harry had to dive for Neville's hand when he saw a vial of powdered chizpurfle fang edging dangerously close to the cauldron. THIS, Harry knew, would make their cauldron blow up.

"Just . . . do what I tell you to do." Harry muttered, dangerously close to pulling out his wand and cursing Neville into oblivion. Neville scowled and looked ready to protest but Snape had that evil glint in his eyes and Neville knew that if he didn't do as Harry said, he would be in a lot of trouble.

They worked for half an hour in relative peace, though some students were becoming increasingly more agitated by the complete silence in the room. Snape was just walking around without saying a word, watching everyone work and not saying anything at all, just taking vials out of people's hands and shaking his head.

When everyone had finally completed their potions, Snape glided to the front of the classroom, robes billowing behind him and tapped the chalkboard with his wand; all of the ingredients were replaced with different ones.

"NOW the fun begins." Snape said, a creepy smirk crossing his face. Harry and everyone else in the room perked up. Had Snape just said FUN? NO! NO Snape fun! Snape fun HAD to be evil! "One of you shall drink the potion while your partner makes the remedy as quickly as possible. Begin now." Neville and Harry exchanged looks. Both were about to point at the other and tell them that HE had to drink the potion when Snape practically materialized behind them.

"Longbottom, YOU drink the potion. Potter will make the remedy." Harry stared at him. No, God no. Not with this blistering headache.

"B-But professor!" Neville started weakly.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your impertinence. Now do it." Snape said, smirking widely. Neville trembled slightly before drinking the potion and immediately dropped to the floor. The half of the class that had been forced to drink the potion was in similar situations. Everyone left awake (or alive, depending on how a person looked at the situation) scrambled to get the new ingredients as quickly as possible to brew the potion required for the serum. Some nearly hysterical people tripped over the sleeping/dead people but Snape managed to catch the fallen vials before they hit the ground.

Harry's headache became worse and worse to the point that he saw his surroundings only in red and the pounding in his head drowned out all other sounds. He didn't know if he would be able to make it properly. He knew in the back of his head that Snape, no matter how much he hated his students, would never allow any of them to die. Still, Harry couldn't help working desperately. He had to make the potion. He had to do it. He may feel that overwhelming guilt again if there was ever a time that he needed to make this potion for an emergency and he was unable to. He had to make it. He had to make it.

"Mr. Potter . . . MR. POTTER!" Harry snapped out of his thoughts and looked up, then down to find that his potion was finally completed.

"Oh." He muttered, jerkily pouring the potion into Neville's mouth. Neville gradually woke up, blinking his eyes slowly as he looked around in confusion. Harry sat back, breathing as slowly as he possibly could. The red was becoming so bright, so painful. God, what was WRONG with him?

"You should be happy Longbottom. This was a diluted version of the potion. The result of drinking the completely undiluted version would have the same result of, say, falling through the Veil of Death in the Department of Mysteries." Snape said, keeping his eyes locked on Harry.

Harry visibly stiffened, his headache reaching its highest pitch. He had to get his energy out, he had to make it stop, he had to make it

STOP! HE COULDN'T LET THAT BASTARD TALK ABOUT SIRIUS SO CASUALLY! HE COULDN'T LET SNAPE TALK ABOUT HIS GODFATHER AND PRETEND HARRY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE BLOODY HELL HE WAS TALKING ABOUT!!

Harry's wand was to Snape's throat in a second, Harry's blood-shot eyes giving his eyes the appearance of being completely red.

"Don't you dare. . ." He hissed viciously, "talk about Sirius like that." Then, the pain was gone. The headache vanished without a trace and Harry just stood there with his mouth open slightly and a vacant look in his eyes. He slumped to the floor unconscious, wand still clutched in his hand tightly.

Severus stared down at the crumpled form of the Potter boy, eyes wide. There was no way . . . but he HAD said it. He had SAID it!

Don't you dare talk about Sirius like that.

Author's Note (thank yous):

LIME Thank you for your support, we're glad you love our fic.

ASHLEE *smirks* We've already discussed your questions during lunch. Glad you enjoy it so far.

JASEN *indignantly* We rather enjoy the scenes where Ron and Hermione annoy Harry. PMSing!Harry is fun. Truly, there's a point to Ron and Hermione aggravating Harry, you'll see why.

MIKE POTTER 2002 We would like to clarify that the Harry from the Original Universe (i.e. the one currently still alive) is not really "Neville-like". He hates pretending to act stupid.

MARZ1 We use the excerpts so that we don't miss anything important in the story and most of the details are included in the excerpts anyway. We'll try to put less of them, or maybe shorter ones. As for Ron and Hermione being out of character, how so? We would really like to know to improve our story. We're trying to keep everyone as in character as is humanly possible.

LATEROSE Eh. a bit of a tantrum. And don't worry, people will find out about the secret though we aren't going to reveal WHO. Thank you for your support.

SZIHUOKO No worries, he won't allow himself to be pushed around by Ron and Hermione for long.

FLAME'S GUARDIAN Thank you and we're very flattered that you enjoy our story enough to check everyday.

ERIKALYA ARVANESSE In the actual books, Harry always hid his scar with his hair. So we assume no one would bother to lift his bangs like Ron did in the second chapter.

JESSI MALFOY We love you dearly and don't mean to be rude, but please read the Author's Note at the beginning of this chapter to clear up your question about seeing Dumb!Harry in the book universe (by that meaning the Original Universe).

CYNICAL SYTHERIN *Amber Evans Potter restrains herself from pouncing on her* EVERYONE won't find out but a select few will. You'll just have to wait and see what happens since there will be no strangling (sorry!) though some hexing MIGHT occur. ^_~ Snape will definitely be in there more and we hope you and all the other Snape fans enjoy his role in our story.

VICIOUS LILY Did enough happen in this chapter? We don't want the plot to go too fast because we would like this story to be fairly long. PLEASE read the Author's Note at the beginning of this chapter. We will elaborate later and thank you.

TATALINA Thank you. We tried to keep them as Canon as possible

Chapter Ten: Leaving Only Scars

Poppy watched Mr. Potter twist and turn on the magical stretcher he had been placed on, his forehead still bleeding. He had just been hurried into the Hospital Wing by Severus, who looked furious and strangely worried. He was rarely ever anything but cold and irritable, worried didn't suit him but after a second look at Mr. Potter she could understand why. After all, a student had collapsed and had started bleeding in his classroom! There was a bloodied bandage over Mr. Potter's forehead where the blood was still dripping down the sides of his face and caking his eyelids. When Poppy attempted to remove the cloth to check his wound and his temperature, Severus snapped at her.

"Don't touch it!" He practically hissed, moving her hand away from the boy's face. Poppy stumbled back a little, surprised by his vicious tone.

"B-But" She hardened her expression and bared her teeth threateningly as her motherly instinct to help and heal her patients took over. "Severus, he is MY patient! Let me see what the matter with him is!"

"I said don't TOUCH it!" His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Heal him in every way you can, but don't remove this bandage or try to see what's on his forehead. I expressly forbid it." No matter how Poppy threatened or even pleaded, she couldn't get any leverage to argue his firm command. After nearly an hour of this, Poppy grudgingly promised not to touch that infernal bandage and to heal everything else that might be wrong with HER patient. Honestly! Who did he think he was to tell HER what HER patients needed?

Mr. Potter was extremely pale and he twitched every time her hand came near his head. She gently prodded his skin, making sure he hadn't lost feeling (that had happened a few times before during Severus' classes) and she checked his pulse. To her surprise, his heart rate was perfectly normal, if just a bit accelerated. There was a minor burn on his upper arm (from what she wasn't entirely sure of) so she healed that and several other bruises and burns. 'How did Mr. Potter come to HAVE these?' When she gently prodded his left ankle, he gave a tiny whimper of pain.

As she watched, various injuries began to appear on his body. Not exactly appear, more as if the wounds had been there but slowly showed themselves. She tried to reason that bruises took a while to form even if the pain was always there. But something still nagged at her. She didn't think she had ever seen a student that had been so badly beaten up after a POTIONS class! True, she had seen enough curses and potion side effects to last her ten lifetimes but this . . . this was something she had only seen after a Death Eater tortured someone. The only difference, of course, was that Mr. Potter was still ALIVE.

At long last she just sat back and watched as more and more of his body slowly developed burns. She quickly healed them but the areas where none had been present before slowly began to develop even more burns and bruises. His upper lip split at one point and he cried out in pain, arching off the bed a bit. Poppy quickly went to heal it, staring wide-eyed at his face. The blood continued to drip from his forehead but, strangely enough, when the blood dribbled off his body and towards the bed, it suddenly vanished. Were his injuries an illusion? It didn't seem to be but then . . . where did all of his blood GO?

After scrambling to heal all of his injuries, Mr. Potter finally started to relax. Poppy sighed in relief and looked around the room, surprised that Severus had actually stayed. Usually the brooding Potion's Master would stay only long enough to make sure that Poppy secured her patients into their beds before he left to kill anyone who had dared touch anything in his dungeons while he had been absent. However, this time, something seemed different. True, Poppy hadn't seen these kinds of wounds in a long time but for Severus to remain, he must have been very worried. And no matter how much he denied it, Severus DID care about his students.

"Is he alright?" Severus mumbled, his lips barely moving.

"Yes, he should be fine now. That is, unless he gets a more severe burn. What happened exactly? And why are these wounds suddenly . . . appearing on his body? The potions I know that make this happen are in the restricted section!" Severus sat back, resisting

the urge to rub his temples. He had a splintering headache from the long wait, but he HAD to make sure that Poppy wouldn't touch the bandage. If she saw the scar . . . the BLEEDING scar, she would ask even more uncomfortable questions.

"I honestly have no idea. He didn't drink either the potion he brewed in class nor the remedy to it. He became violent for a moment, threatened to curse me I believe, and then fainted. He banged his head on the edge of the table, thus the cut on his forehead. I took care of it and placed a spell on the cloth so that the blood would return to his body after it leaked out of the wound. It is because of this that I did not want you to remove it then or now." Poppy nodded. That explained where the blood had disappeared to though she was still a bit miffed that he hadn't thought she could handle it.

'No Poppy, if he hadn't done that Mr. Potter might have bled to death before he could get to you.' A sensible voice in her mind told her. She worked to push back the brunt of her jealous protection and thought logically about the results of leaving only her to help Mr. Potter. He would have died and she would have felt worse. So there was no reason to be angry with Severus.

"Do you know of any reason that this might have happened to him? Was he acting strangely before your class?" Severus shifted again, looking thoughtful.

"I overheard him mentioning to Ms. Granger that he had a terrible headache just before dinner. Though I have no idea how that might help you. Make sure not to remove the bandage, even when he stops bleeding. Now if you will excuse me, I have to make sure my dungeons are still intact." With a curt nod, Severus walked quietly out of the Hospital Wing, looking like a lost shadow. Poppy shook her head and carefully propped up Mr. Potter's head on his pillow, healing the minor burn marks that had appeared while she had been speaking to Severus. She only wished she knew what had happened to him.

Severus walked into his classroom to find all of the cauldrons cleaned out and all of the equipment used during the potion-making placed out into their respectful places. Nodding in satisfaction, Severus

continued on to his office and closed the door, immediately starting towards his desk. Someone, however, was sitting in one of his chairs, drinking some tea.

"Draco, I forgot." Severus said in way of apology as he rubbed his temples and sat behind his desk. He allowed himself to express how tired he was by leaning back in his seat and closing his eyes. He could hear Draco chuckling softly.

"I knew you would. I heard about the Potter incident. What happened to him anyway?" He continued sipping his tea calmly, looking a bit amused. That smug, superior look was gone. Draco knew, of course, that if Severus saw that look pointed at HIM, Draco would find himself scrutinized even more than he already was. No one looked at Severus Snape like that; even the Dark Lord looked at him respectfully. He was, after all, a prized Death Eater.

"I'm not quite sure. He's been acting very peculiar as of late." Severus said thoughtfully, taking the offered cup of tea from Draco.

"Yes, he HAS been. I have to watch my back more with him than with Weasley and Granger put together! He's become too calm; he isn't frightened of ANYTHING I don't think. And I've been watching him. He's doing MUCH better in his classes but he hides it, pretends to take a long time in doing it."

"Interesting." Severus said mysteriously, sipping his tea.

"Argh! You KNOW something! Tell me!" Draco began to whine, looking at him hopefully. Severus chuckled and placed his tea cup down.

"Draco, you do realize that whining does not befit a Malfoy?" Severus said amusedly. Draco instantly sat up straighter, setting his face into a scowl.

"I was NOT whining. I was ASKING." He said. Severus smirked and sat back in his chair, waiting for Draco's frown to deepen before he began to speak.

"He has some kind of scar on his forehead, nearly identical to that of Longbottom. And he threatened to curse me for "speaking about Sirius like that". How does he even know about Black? The mutt has been in Azkaban for fifteen years!" Draco sat back, looking thoughtful.

"Mother told me about him. Did he really kill all those Muggles and that wizard?" Severus snorted at Draco's question.

"Of course he didn't, that rat Pettigrew framed him. But he was placed into Azkaban for it right beside the Potters, Pettigrew's doing again." Severus said as he sipped his tea again. Draco wrinkled his nose.

"The Potters didn't really do all of that stuff, did they? Killing those two Muggles and abusing their kid. . ." Draco trailed off inquiringly. Severus laughed.

"As I said, Pettigrew's doing again. He framed them just as he did Black but he didn't expect his own mother to take in the Potter boy. If Pettigrew's "death" hadn't taken place at the same time as the Potter boy being left alone in the world like that, it's not likely she would have demanded to raise him." Severus said. Draco was interested to know how Severus came about this knowledge, but then he knew perhaps he would rather not know. Severus seemed angry about something as he stared into his tea cup.

"So . . . why hasn't Dumbledore realized that there's something weird about Potter?" Draco asked, trying to change the subject before Severus could close himself off and forget that Draco was there. The potion's master had done that on several occasions when he had spoken about something that led him into darker thoughts that needed his immediate attention.

"For one, I've been covering up most of the mistakes he's made. For example, I've attributed his sudden threat and headache to a stray charm and a badly made potion by Longbottom. And as for his sudden aptitude for his work, I have passed around the other staff members and mentioned that Granger has been tutoring him more often than usual." Severus said, snapping out of his thoughts. Draco was a bit astonished that his Head of House would go to such lengths just to cover up for a GRYFFINDOR like Potter.

"Why are you doing this?" He asked curiously, putting down his tea cup. Severus glanced at him for a long time before shaking his head.

"I'll see you tomorrow Draco." Severus said, ignoring the pleading look Draco attempted to use to get an answer. Sighing, Draco trudged out of the room as Severus closed the door after him.

~I do this . . . because his eyes are so much like Lily's now, ~ Severus thought to himself.

Bellatrix screamed in agony, writhing as she clawed at the floor, leaving nail marks all along it. The Dark Lord stood over her, his eyes narrowed to fine slits and his wand pointed at her back as he administered the Cruciatus. Pettigrew looked absolutely horror-stricken, hiding behind Crabbe and Goyle (who were too stupid to realize that they would be hit by a spell that might be directed towards Pettigrew later on).

"Bellatrix, I am disappointed in you: losing the ashes and then setting fire to my store room table. I had some very valuable potion ingredients on that table." The Dark Lord said with false cheerfulness. Bellatrix moaned in pain and twitched slightly.

"M-Master . . . I-I had no hand in this. I did not k-know that Foxfire would have that effect on t-the ashes mixed with the other potions. But I DO know that t-the remains were human." The Dark Lord tilted his head slightly. At least she had recorded her findings and saved them before the table had exploded, but he HAD to punish her for making such a clumsy mistake. Bellatrix was not usually so inept.

"I could have told you that." Severus said coldly, sneering at her. "Master, perhaps I should have been in charge of analyzing the ashes since Bellatrix doesn't seem to have been capable of such a simple feat." Bellatrix glared mildly up at him, still trying to get enough of the pain off her lower body to stand.

"Wormtail." The Dark Lord hissed softly.

"Y-Yes master?" Pettigrew poked his head out from behind Crabbe and Goyle and slowly came up to stand in front of his master. He looked down at Bellatrix nervously. When the Dark Lord punished Bellatrix he was always in a bad mood. Which meant more punishment for everyone else.

"You are safe for now . . . but unless we find out who the owner of those ashes was within the year, you WILL be severely punished." The Dark Lord said, a deranged smirk finding its way onto his face. Pettigrew shivered at the implications of this statement.

Author's Note (thank yous):

LIME heh, yes we get it. I hope this chapter answered some of your questions and we love your opinion. Thank you for your review!

ASHLEE thank you for telling us about that, we went back and fixed it. Yes, it was a type-o. We're sorry about that. *laughs* well, we hope we explained what happened to Bellatrix. And you'll see what happened to the ashes later on. Thanks for your review!

JASEN thank you for telling us about the spelling mistake, we went back and fixed it. Also, the thing about Harry nearly cursing Severus was a result of the Sirius comment and the fact that he had such a bad headache. Under normal circumstances he probably wouldn't have tried to attack him, but the circumstances aren't normal. ^^ And thank you for your input, we'll take it into consideration for future chapters.

LATEROSE well thank you for thinking our fic is the best! ^_^ yes, Sirius and Harry's parents are still in Azkaban and, hopefully, you won't get TOO mixed up with our fic and others. We hope you enjoyed this chapter as well.

ERIKALYA ARVANESSE well, since we portray the Alternate Universe Harry as being a bit Neville-like, everyone around him ignores him. They probably wouldn't even notice the scar because

they have better things to do then look at that Potter kid that's always being protected by Weasley and Granger.

JESSI MALFOY *Amber and Rose fight over the cookie until one of Amber's muses steals it away* ^^; thanks for the cookie! We're glad you enjoyed the chapter.

CYNICAL SYTHERIN ^_^ thanks for the review! Glad you enjoyed it and don't worry, there will be a lot more curses and such to satisfy EVERYONE'S blood and violence lust.

VICIOUS LILY awww, we're sorry for making you feel like that! And we're glad that you're sticking around to see what happens next. Please don't feel afraid to tell us if you're confused and, unless it will reveal too much information, we'll try to answer your questions thoroughly.

TATALINA *laughs* we update every Friday (unless there's a LOT of homework or unless Amber has writer's block, which isn't likely to happen). ^_^ and we're glad you enjoy how we depict the characters. We think the excerpts are good for the same reason.

KATA MALFOY we're glad you're enjoying the fic so much and as for Harry's parents and Sirius being in Azkaban, you'll find out about that soon, we promise. We didn't just throw that out to confuse all of you. ^_~

LOCKER1198 wow, you know, you helped us a lot there. We really didn't notice that so we're going to try to incorporate your comment into our story. Thank you for your input!

LADY SHANG we're glad you're enjoying the story so far.

ANKALAGON it is going to be revealed in another chapter. We're sorry if we insulted you, we just thought that you didn't remember they were in Azkaban. ^_~ some reviewers forgot.

LADY PHOENIX SLYTHERIN we're glad you like it so much. ^^ and we hope you liked the update.

SNUGGS thank you for your enthusiasm and we hope you like the update.

ALLYANNA we're glad you like the story so far. And that's a great question, about what Sirius, Lily and James did. ^^ you guys will have to wait and see, we WILL address that issue though so stick around!

SZELIJ and we ADORE you for loving it! Thank you!

MARZ1 there is a reason we are emphasizing Ron and Hermione's 'not-so-nice' qualities. Erm. . . because she knocked the wrong ingredient into it. Thanks for the review!

SMILEZ he does detect something wrong with Harry but ignores it. . . after reading this chapter you know why. . . and you guessed right. . . he wasn't particularly important in that universe. Everything will be explained eventually. And you'll find out what happens to Harry at the end of . . . well . . . at the end. Thank you for the review!

Chapter Eleven: Shades of Life: Part One

"Hello my little Harry!" How are you hmm? Can you say mummy? Come on, say mummy!" A gurgling sound was Lily's reply. James came up behind his wife and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his head on her shoulder to smile down at his son. Harry gurgled up at his father, waving his pudgy hands in the air, begging to be held.

"Handsome little bugger isn't he?" James commented teasingly as he lifted Harry into his arms. Harry instantly went for the gold-rimmed glasses on his father's nose and attempted to put them on his own nose. Unfortunately for Harry, gravity and Harry's extra small nose resulted in James stooping swiftly to grab them. Harry giggled and put his fingers in the general direction of James's mouth.

"Honestly James, you and Sirius are going to corrupt him!" Lily huffed, putting her hands on her hips. James laughed and turned to kiss her tenderly.

"Of course we are. He'll be a little mischief-maker yet! That is, if he doesn't take after his mum." Winking at her, James carefully returned Harry to his crib. The baby promptly fell asleep, twisting slightly to get comfortable in his covers.

A crash and loud cursing from below interrupted the couple's playful banter.

"Padfoot you git! Get off me!" A shout could be heard downstairs.

Lily and James shared an indulgent smile before hurrying down to prevent any further damage to their living room.

The sight that awaited them - while being a normal occurrence - was quite amusing. In a heap on the floor, covered in soot, were the sheepish-looking Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.

"What did you break THIS time Black?" Lily asked sternly, trying to look as angry as she could. Sirius disentangled himself from Remus and stood, brushing himself off.

"I didn't break anything Carrots. Prongs paid me not to." Lily's head snapped up when James sniggered behind his hand who then promptly tried to look outraged.

"I-I didn't! You have to believe me Lily!" James' face instantly transformed into that of a wounded puppy. He even whined a bit while wrapping his arms around her. Lily's jaw clenched.

"DON'T you look at me like that James Potter! I know you well enough! If you have to bribe your friends not to blow up our house, I refuse to kiss you!"

"Aww Lily, don't be like that!" James said, kissing her defiantly. Lily grumbled but kissed him back.

"Fine, but they had best not wake Harry!"

"Hello little Prongs!" Sirius cried from inside of Harry's room. He and Remus had snuck up the stairs while the couple had been arguing. Lily developed a frightening, psychotic glint in her eyes. James hurriedly grabbed Lily tightly around the waist to keep her from running upstairs and cursing Sirius into oblivion. She had become VERY moody and possessive since Harry's birth.

"Now now Lily, what did we agree on? No killing Padfoot in front of the baby." James told her mock-sternly. Lily's left eye twitched dangerously.

"If I drag him to the backyard or one of the guest rooms it won't BE in front of the baby."

"Lily, don't make me get you excited." He slowly ran his fingers down her thighs, making her shiver and instantly relax. "Harry is more than enough; another kid isn't the best idea right now." James whispered hotly into her ear. Lily turned to glare at him mildly.

"That isn't fair." She responded, pouting.

"I vowed to keep Sirius alive long enough to get him married." James shrugged. "It's annoying, but I DID promise. And since he obviously doesn't have any love interests at the moment, we're a bit stuck my dear."

"Damn you." Lily grumbled good-naturedly. "Go on and make sure your best friend doesn't kill Harry."

"Aww, come on Lily! He didn't MEAN to drop him that time!" James said. Lily scowled up at him.

"He was just lucky that I caught Harry before he crashed into that building. Really! Sirius and that damned bike of his! I KNEW it was a bad idea from the start!" Lily went into the kitchen, her domain, where even Sirius dared not tread. She always went there to cool off. James shook his head in amusement and went into his son's room to find Sirius cooing at Harry, Remus gently rocking the baby in his arms.

"Hey little Prongs! Have you missed your godfather hmm? Have you missed old Paddy? Can you say Paddy?" Delighted gurgling followed this questioning.

"Pa'y! Pa'y!" Harry said through his gurgling, clapping his hands. James froze at the doorframe.

"LILY! He talked!" There was a loud crash in the kitchen and thumping on the stairs as Lily came racing up behind James, catching his shoulder to keep from falling.

"Did he say mummy?" She demanded, hope evident on her face.

"Pa'y! Pa'y!" Harry chirped to his mother, clapping his pudgy hands. Lily turned completely red as she glared at Sirius. Remus instinctively smelled danger and wisely moved Harry to the other side of the room.

"L-Lily . . . r-remember what we talked about sweetie? Honey? Baby?" James said, trying to bar her way.

"DIE!" Lily screamed, tackling Sirius and pushing him roughly up against a wall before he could bolt.

"Pa'y! Pa'y!" Harry said, laughing. Lily began to choke the gurgling baby's godfather.

"HE SHOULD HAVE LEARNED TO SAY MUMMY FIRST!" She screamed despairingly. Sirius whimpered pitifully, trying to get Lily away from his throat as Harry kept laughing delightedly. Remus shifted Harry slightly to rub his forehead exhaustedly and James leaned back against the doorframe, knowing he should probably help Sirius but far too amused by the sight of his wife strangling his best friend to really move. He quickly ducked into his own room and returned with a camera and took a picture of all in the room.

Harry loved when his mummy picked him up and nuzzled his neck, tickling him. He also loved when his daddy carried him on his back or tickled him in all the right spots to make him giddy with laughter. But most especially, he loved when Paddy and Moony came to see him and his parents. Oh, the fun times they had! Paddy would let him have fun rides on his back and Moony was always so peaceful and soothing since he always had the best naps when he was rocked to sleep by Moony. And his mummy always made the best food when they were there! Harry always got to eat just a little grown-up food, he always liked that.

And they always brought him pretty presents whenever they came. Like Paddy brought him a shiny ball with wings. He had almost eaten it, it looked so good, but honestly, he had only been chewing on one of the wings. The grown-ups didn't have to take it away! He wouldn't have eaten it, it was too pretty. And another time, Moony brought him a really interesting stick thing. It looked just like his mummy and daddy's too! He started waving it around wildly, making all sorts of pretty colors and birds fly out of it. He chewed on the end to see if it tasted as good as it looked, but it didn't. His parents didn't take this away from him though and eventually he found a good hiding spot for it so they wouldn't be able to take it away anyway. They would never think to look under his pillow! He felt so clever.

Then one day, that mean man came and took him away.

Harry hated him. His parents and Paddy and Moony always tried to push Harry into that mean Wormy man that smelled bad and nearly dropped him every time he came for a visit. So Harry had learnt to cry really loud when he had to be with Wormy. He would much rather have stayed with his mummy and daddy and Moony and Paddy. He liked them so much more. That cruel man was always looking out the window and writing things down on paper when no one was looking. Harry would have told his parents, if only he could. He was still learning new words. He could say "Paddy" and "Moony" and "Daddy" but he still hadn't managed "Mummy" yet. He knew his mummy wanted him to say it, but he was keeping it a secret. He was going to surprise her!

But then Wormy took him away from his crib and out of the house. At first Harry wailed and screamed until he was nearly hyperventilating, and then Wormy just covered Harry's mouth with his hand. When THIS failed to work, he took out a stick and did something so Harry couldn't yell anymore. Eventually Harry decided to just sulk, that usually worked at home.

Then, when they were in a dark alley, Wormy began to hit him. Hard. He broke one of Harry's little arms and bruised his body badly but he was careful not to kill him. Poor Harry sobbed silently, trying to get some kind of sound out of his desperate lungs. He wanted his mummy! He wanted his mummy! That mean man was hurting him! He wanted his mummy! Please, he wanted his mummy!

And then Wormy put him inside of a phone booth and did something. Harry suddenly found himself inside of a crowded lobby and his voice came back to him. He shrieked and screamed and sobbed and thrashed. All of the grown-ups instantly stopped walking and talking and hurriedly surrounding him. Harry didn't recognize any of them. He wanted his mummy! He began to scream it as loudly as he could.

"MUMMY! MUMMY! MUMMY!" All of the grown-ups panicked and tried to heal his bruises and cuts, attempting unsuccessfully to soothe his cries. Touching him only made it worse, he was terrified of strangers.

A nice woman took him to a room and took care of the wounds, and Harry gradually began to calm down. He tried to make it known that he wanted his mummy by continuously saying her name. When the woman didn't seem to understand what he was trying to say, he tried saying "Daddy" and "Paddy" and "Moony". SURELY she should have known them? They were the only people he really knew. This woman HAD to know them! How could she NOT know them?

When he was beginning to get worried that he would never see his mummy again, he caught sight of her. He began to giggle delightedly, trying to reach out for her. She looked beaten-up and extremely tired but when she heard Harry, she tried to wrench away from the men holding her back but she couldn't.

"HARRY! God, let me see if he's okay! HARRY!" She kept screaming, sobbing, begging, and pleading desperately with her captors. James, behind his wife, also fought viciously to try to reach Harry. But he couldn't. He was too badly beaten, too tired, he wasn't strong enough to reach him.

When Harry realized that his parents were being taken away, he began to cry loudly. The nice woman from before attempted to soothe him but he would not be quieted.

"MUMMY! MUMMY! MUMMY!" He screamed repeatedly. Lily perked up slightly and fought harder, trying to get to her son. But she was pushed into the elevator and that was the last she and James saw of their son.

"Are you sure you are up to this challenge Ms. Pettigrew? I understand that the loss of your son and your recently deceased husband have been a great burden on you, but are you sure you can raise young Mr. Potter?" Mr. Dumbledore asked, watching her carefully over his half-moon spectacles. "You must understand, during these times we must be absolutely sure that he will not

become what his parents inevitably became. He must never become a Death Eater."

"My poor Peter! Yes, I'll take care of the dear boy! But . . . Mr. Dumbledore, wasn't it Harry's GODFATHER that was the Death Eater?" Ann Pettigrew inquired, shifting in her seat.

"Madam, in these times we can only assume that Mr. and Mrs. Potter were also Death Eaters. They would not have allowed their child to be around a Death Eater if they were not Death Eaters themselves. And since they continue to defend Mr. Black as well, we can only believe that they are, in fact, Death Eaters as well."

"What will become of them sir? What should I tell Harry if he ever asks me where his real parents are?"

"Tell him the truth I suppose. They are in Azkaban on charges of child abuse and also, for being Death Eaters. And remember, we still have reason to believe that Remus Lupin is a Death Eater as well. Make sure that man never meets Harry."

"I'll do my best sir, you can count on me."

Author's Note (thank yous):

ASHLEE *smirks* yup. You'll just have to wait to find out. Thanks for the review!

ALLYANNA I hope this answered your question about Harry's parents and Sirius even further. Thanks for the review!

VICIOUS LILY *Amber and Rose raise their hands as well* who wants us to kill Wormtail? Now you also know why our favorite werewolf hasn't shown up. *Rose pouts* It's quite sad really. Also, if you don't understand why this chapter was relevant to the story, please continue reading and it will be clarified. Thanks for the review!

JESSI MALFOY *Rose snatches a cookie for herself and one for Erik while Amber and the rest of her muses begin grumbling, partly sheepish and partly outraged* What?! I only took my half! *Amber

takes the other two and once she realizes they have caramel bolts screaming* CARMEL! *all of the muses* HEY! *they all run after Amber* We're happy you still like it and thanks for the review!

X-GIRL X-FILE we try to be original and still Canon. Thank you for the review and please tell us how you think Harry is behaving differently from the book. Your comments help us with our story, though we believe that since Harry is under a great deal of stress, he WOULD be a bit out of character.

ROGUE ENCHANTRESS sorry! We can't answer your questions YET since our revealing that information would ruin the story for you. Thank you for the review!

KATA MALFOY Dummy *Amber pokes Rose* Sorry, I mean Dumbledore has noticed but Severus has covered up for Harry very well. Also, since Harry isn't as important in the Alternate Universe as he is in the Original Universe, there is no real reason for Dumbledore to suspect anything from him. You'll just have to wait and see what we have Harry do. Thanks for the review!

SOMNIO *Amber and Rose fall off their chairs* no need to yell. You'll soon find out. Thank you for the review!

CR *confused* what bed? And how are we copying the movie? We would truly like to know, especially since we've received so many complaints about the excerpts we've taken from the fifth book. Thanks for the review!

LATEROSE *feels like she is a broken record* you'll find out why soon. Thank you for the review!

JOSE, CATALINA I'm not quite sure what you mean. Please clarify what you meant about the Point of Views and the Order of the Phoenix scenes in your next review. Thanks for the reviews!

OLIVIA WOOD *smirks* Snape - as well as Malfoy - are both very suspicious already. They know something is up. You'll have to wait and see when and IF they ever get in on Harry's secret. Thank you for the review!

SZELIJ *shrugs* perhaps. Thank you for the review!

ERIKALYA ARVANESSE *nods* yes. People are noticing, but because he is just Harry Potter and no longer the Boy-Who-Lived with a Neville-like personality, no one cares YET. Thanks for the review!

MARZ1 *continues to be a broken record* you shall see. Normally Amber wouldn't check there, but she did. Good thing she found the notebook though, in one of the classrooms. That's why all of you get this lovely chapter! Thank you for your concern and for the review!

ANGELIC *sniffles* really?! Thank you so much. You don't know how much that means to us. Thanks for the review!

KATEYDIDNT heh. Good question. And one Amber and I decided upon a long time ago *shakes her head* No, he most definitely is not. He's the Boy-Who-Lived in this universe, but a decidedly weaker one than Harry. How is Harry out of character? We really wanted this to be Canon. As for your other questions, we're not telling! And yes, they have a squib for Defense. There is a reason for Mrs. Figg. Don't worry! Thank you for the review!

DUMBLEDORE *Rose ignores the evil penname as Amber nearly strangles her* you will see more classroom related magic, don't worry. We just have some information that should be told before we get back to the juicy stuff. No worries there. *smirks* Correct assumptions. Thanks for the review!

KAIZER KNUCKZ *laughs* WE HAVE AND WE WILL ONCE A WEEK! This week was an exception. Sorry about that, we never took into account losing nearly six pages worth of a chapter over the weekend. Thanks for the review!

DUCHESSA *pouts slightly* we're happy you're enjoying our fic but we have to sadly inform you that this is not a very 'United Trio' fic - in either universe - sorry. Harry's relationship with his friends in the Original Universe is much better than it will become in the Alternate Universe, if that's any consolation for you. One of them will still

remain a friend of Harry's in the Alternate Universe, just not as close of a friend as before. All questions will be answered eventually. Thank you for the review!

GANYMADE we're happy you love it so far. Thank you for the review!

Chapter Twelve: Shades of Life: Part Two

"MUMMY!" Poppy raced out of her office at the horrified shriek. Harry was writhing in his bed, clenching his jaw so tightly that Poppy wondered how his teeth didn't shatter. She stood there watching him worriedly, checking over him to make sure nothing had forced the cry from his lips, but he appeared to be perfectly healthy and fully healed.

"MUMMY!" She leaped back when he screamed again, rolling around slightly as he continued mumbling that word over and over. Well, this was nothing new. Mr. Potter always cried out for his Mummy Ann whenever he was in the Hospital Wing because that nasty boy, Draco Malfoy, would curse him senseless. Sometimes he would fall down the trick step and harm himself, or blow up his cauldron and come running to her with burns all over his body and an occasional horn poking out of his ears.

Now that she thought about it, however, Harry hadn't been coming to her often, not since after the first . . . what was it, after the first month or so of school? Perhaps his friends were finally looking out for him. Or perhaps he was beginning to take his studies more seriously? Or perhaps those infernal professors were being more careful during their classes and took the necessary precautions required to PROTECT their students instead of harming them!

Well, it could be a number of things. But she knew it was still the Harry Potter she had watched grow, the one that always came running to her when he was hurt and who always cried for his mummy, even when he was unconscious. It was sad really, what happened to him because of those horrible parents. How dare they beat such a sweet child! To think, he might have grown up to be a Death Eater had Albus and that dear Peter Pettigrew not interfered with the horrors that the Potters were inflicting on the poor boy!

Running quickly for the open front door, Harry screamed in annoyance when a house elf quickly grabbed his three-year-old body around the waist and lifted him off his feet.

"Please Master Harry! Stay inside the house!" Blinky the house elf squeaked. She desperately tried to console the shrieking child, using every soothing technique she could think of but nothing worked.

"Blinky, I want mummy! I want daddy and Paddy and Moony! I don't WANT that lady!" Harry cried, writhing and wriggling. Blinky held him firmly and dragged her young master towards his room, magically closing the door before releasing Harry.

After being released, the three-year-old ran to his bed and crawled under the covers sobbing. Blinky hurried to soothe her young master, gently petting his covered head. Clicking her tongue gently, she managed to coax him out from under the covers enough to see his adorable little face.

"Master Harry, please calm down sir. Please!" Harry continued crying and Blinky finally sighed. "Master Harry, Blinky will be beat if you continue screaming like that sir." When she finished this sentence, Harry had calmed dramatically. He stared at her with his huge emerald eyes and she nearly lost her stern resolve. "Thank you Master Harry sir. Now, are you hungry? Blinky will bring you something to eat."

"I-I'm not hungry!" Harry pouted, betrayed by his grumbling tummy. Blinky disappeared with a resounding pop before returning a few minutes later with a tray laden with all of Harry's favorite foods. The little boy stuck out his bottom lip and feigned disinterest although his stomach continuously betrayed his growing hunger.

"Please eat something Master Harry." When she received no response from this, she smiled in a conniving way. "If you don't, you won't have the strength to escape this house sir. There are dragons and all kinds of powerful enchantments to keep young Master indoors. If you don't eat, how can you beat all of the monsters sir?" This seemed to arouse Harry's interest and his stomach only urged him on. He practically attacked the food. Blinky chuckled and petted his hair in a motherly fashion.

"Are you going to help me escape Blinky? You can come with me! I bet mummy and daddy would let you stay, you're so nice!" Harry said as he nibbled on a biscuit, sitting Indian style as he watched Blinky's reaction. Her expressive eyes widened slightly and she shook her head, making her ears hit her cheeks gently.

"Oh, Blinky can't leave this place Master Harry sir. Blinky is bound here, a house elf does not leave unless with her master, sir. Or mistress." At that she turned to glare mildly at the door.

"Do you hate the strange lady too?" Harry asked curiously, his face covered in mashed potatoes as he took another bite from his half-finished biscuit.

"Yes, Blinky hates mistress." Blinky said with a strange anger in her voice. She suddenly caught herself. "What an awful thing to say." She leapt off the bed and began to bang her head against the wall, yelping with pain. Harry scrambled off his bed and hurried to stop her. When he managed to pry her away from the wall, she was cross-eyed and a large red welt marked her normally soothing face.

"Please don't do that." Harry pleaded, hugging her childishly when she looked at the wall almost longingly. "I don't like it when you hurt yourself."

"Blinky must punish herself Master Harry. Blinky can't speak ill of her family sir; that is the mark of a bad house elf. Blinky is a good house elf, sir. Blinky can't speak ill of her family." When she realized that he was not going to break the bear hug he had trapped her in, Blinky sighed and reluctantly hugged her young master tightly.

"Will you always stay with me Blinky? Please?" Harry stared up at her with his huge emerald eyes, nearly breaking the poor house elf's heart.

"Of course Blinky will stay with Master Harry! She loves him very much." She began to clean his face with the pillowcase she was wearing, looking him over carefully for any other kinds of bruises he might have received from the last time she had checked him for injuries. She was fiercely protective of her young charge.

"Can we have ice cream before we try to escape? I'll help you! If you're with me no one will be able to say you're a bad house elf." Harry said, smiling at her childishly. "The ice cream will scare the dragons! Dragons don't like yummy things." Blinky laughed at his comment and tugged him back to his bed.

"First take a short nap Master Harry. You look tired." Harry closed his eyes as Blinky tucked him in.

"Just a small one, I don't want to leave the dragons waiting. I want to go back home and see mummy." He muttered sleepily before he turned over on his side and fell asleep. Blinky sat beside him as he slept, gently stroking his hair.

"Happy birthday Harry! How old are you now?" Ann asked, smiling down at him. Harry held up seven fingers.

"I'm SIX!" He said delightedly, his party hat tilting a bit backward and nearly falling off his head. Blinky quickly fixed it and wiped his mouth clean, looking worriedly at him. She hadn't thought the young Master needed so much cake, a good meal would have been much better for him. But the mistress had been stuffing him with sweets ever since she had figured out that was young Master Harry's weakness.

Some streamers and confetti were still flying around the room and a miniature dragon was circling every corner of the room, breathing purple and green fire each time it passed over Harry's head. The room was lit up like some kind of fantasy with purple globes floating all around the room and an enormous cake sitting on a table laden with goblets of apple juice and cider (alcoholic only for the Mistress). Some house elves were scurrying around the room, picking up the remains of Harry's cakes that were only half-eaten and cleaning up the spills he didn't bother to even cry about. The house elf began to check Harry's knees where he had banged them accidentally while riding his new bicycle the day before. She really didn't think the

clumsy bandages that her Mistress had put on him were going to last so she began to mend them quickly.

"Blinky stop that!" Ann said impatiently, pushing the house elf aside. Harry laughed when she hit her head on the edge of his stool. She looked up at him, hurt by his amusement. Ann continued to pet and primp him, the boy's focus going to her completely. Both ignored her as she limped to the edge of the room, waiting a minute to see if something happened to Harry but no, the Mistress made sure not to give him anything dangerous. In fact, she made sure that everything she gave him was absolutely safe. And soft. With no hard edges.

Blinky slowly trudged back into the kitchen when she became aware of this fact and made herself a cold compress to press over the spot where she had hurt her head. Normally she wouldn't bother with her injuries but she didn't want to bleed all over the laundry again and get herself beaten. And besides, if she passed out from the pain again, she would be disowned. And Blinky was a GOOD house elf; she would never do anything worthy of being disowned. She would stay for the young master.

The other house elves in the kitchen glared at her as she stood contemplating her young master before she continued lethargically to the little break in the wall that was her room. It was barely larger than a suitcase but she was quite comfortable there with her dirty blanket and the few knick knacks her mother and grandmother had left her before they had been beaten to death. She cautiously took out a battered picture of her young master when he had been four. He had knocked out one of his front teeth and had cried until Blinky brought him some ice cream. He was smiling cheerfully in the photo and waving at her. She couldn't let anyone see her most precious treasure so she hid it carefully in a loose floorboard a little under the spot where her head rested when she slept.

When the young master had been younger, she usually slept on his rug or even at the end of his bed sometimes, when the mistress was away. Harry made sure the mistress never caught her there. He knew she would have been beaten for it so he was always very careful. He used to love her. Now she was just like all the other house elves, only worse. She barely worked anymore, she was so depressed. Her

wonderful young master, the one she had loved the most in her entire life, didn't love her anymore.

Meanwhile, still celebrating his sixth birthday, Harry quickly ran over to the huge pile of presents he now owned. He ripped the wrapping off of a package containing a large stuffed bear and he hugged it delightedly.

"I love you Mummy Ann! I love you best!" He cried, running up into her lap and hugging her tightly. She smiled at him and hugged him back, rubbing his back gently.

"Good boy! Now don't eat TOO much cake, or you'll make yourself sick! And remember we're having pancakes tomorrow! Oh, and we're also going to get you that puppy like you wanted."

"Yay! I'll call him Paddy, just like that dream I had!" Harry said. Mummy Ann froze, staring at him.

"Where . . . did you say you saw him?" She asked carefully.

"In a dream. It was a nice dream, but I still love you best Mummy Ann!" He wrapped his little arms around her tightly, missing the sigh of relief she allowed to escape her lips before hugging him back just as (if not more so) fiercely.

Author's Note (thank yous):

SIRI KAT *smiles* heh. As you can tell, we found the chapter. Thank you for worrying and for the review!

ERIKALYA ARVANESSE and we adore you for loving it and for understanding what's going on. Thanks for the review!

OLIVIA WOOD *nods solemnly* Yes, poor them. But Sirius will have better luck in upcoming chapters. Thank you for the review!

BOOKWORM Ron and Hermione will be back soon, don't worry. We're happy you like our interpretation. Thank you for the review!

KENNY7 *scowls* trust me, the feeling is mutual. *Rose pouts* Do I get no credit? Okay so I rarely do any of the actual writing, but half the ideas are mine and I beta, choose titles and do the author's notes, don't I get a 'good'? *perks up, Amber shaking her head behind her and rolls her eyes* ^_^ Thanks for the review!

SALLYMANDER we try to be original. Thank you for the review!

WANDERINGWOLF *smirks* is this a wolf thing? And don't worry, Remus will show up eventually. Thanks for the review!

LIME *huggles* hey! We've missed you! Where have you been? And don't worry, there's a reason for these chapters as our first Author's Note says. Thank you for the review!

SOLARIS ISA *eyes widen* oh! We're sorry for making you cry although we are happy that our fic had such a strong effect on you. *both Rose and Amber* We totally agree with how sad the end of the Order of the Phoenix was. *Rose sniffles* I cried as well. *Amber mutters something that sounds suspiciously like 'Fluff Whore' and Rose smacks her upside the head* Ignore her and yes, there will be a somewhat happy ending. *Amber cackles evilly* If I don't kill them all first! *gets glared at by Rose* ^^;;; erm. Thank you for the review!

VICIOUS LILY *bows* thank you. Thank you. REMUS: o.o Thanks *takes the cookie cautiously and is about to bite into it when Sirius snatches it away* Hey! SIRIUS: *swallows the cookie and smiles innocently at Remus* Yes? REMUS: *rolls his eyes good naturedly* Never mind. Amber: ^^ aren't the muses cute? Thanks for the review!

ASHLEE *Rose pouts* it wasn't me this time *points a finger at Amber* the smut was totally her *coughs* and I may have helped a little with the fluff. *smirks* We're rubbing off on you. Thank you for the review!

SZELIJ *smirks* perhaps to both comments and thanks for the review!

ATTENTION ALL!! the third and final part to Shades of Life may be a little late because we have Mid Terms next week, but hopefully it'll be on time. Thank you all again!

Chapter Thirteen: Shades of Life: Part Three

Looking around Diagon Alley, Harry felt a bit lost without his Mummy Ann to buy him sweets and trinkets. But now he was stuck with the stubborn and stingy house elf Blinky. She had been given a specific amount of coins for buying her Master his school robes and she would do her job well and buy them as she had been instructed to do. She was a good, loyal house elf who did as she was told. So whereas Harry was bored and annoyed, Blinky was keeping her mind set to catch pick-pockets and moving out of the way when Harry tried to kick her lightly to walk faster.

Ushering her charge into Madam Malkin's Robes for all Occasions, Blinky hopped down the low stairs and to the nearest stool. Another boy was being fitted by a magical tape-measurer. Harry climbed onto the stool and held out his arms expectantly. After all, how many times had he been fitted for clothes by the house elves? His Mummy Ann would surely buy him some new clothes other than these stupid robes, why did they have to wear a uniform anyway? Why would he have to hide his perfectly suitable clothes under a stupid black robe with the school crest on it?

"First year Hogwarts student?" The boy beside him started. Harry glanced at him, a bit surprised that the boy would speak to him. He had a refined way of holding himself, a slight sneer to his lips as he looked Harry over. When his eyes found Blinky's crouched form beside Harry's feet, a strange smile appeared, in no way losing the sneer. "I am as well; Draco Malfoy. And you are.?"

"None of your business." Harry muttered, trying to ignore the boy. But Draco seemed particularly persistent because he scowled but continued speaking as if what he had to say was the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Do you know what house you'll be in?"

"Gryffindor." Harry said automatically, drawing himself up a bit. After all, Mummy Ann had been in Gryffindor, and her son Peter had been in Gryffindor as well. All of the good and noble people went to Gryffindor; there was no other house for it really. Hufflepuff was full of

whiny wimps and Ravenclaws were all bookworms. He didn't even contemplate entering Slytherin; it was just not going to happen.

"GRYFFINDOR?" Draco said with a snort. "You're kidding right? Not some nancy pansy Gryffindor! I'M going to be a Slytherin, just like the rest of my family." Draco said with a sneer. He didn't seem to have the same interest in Harry as he'd had before. Harry didn't like being ignored, so he decided that Draco wasn't ignoring him, but rather he himself was ignoring Draco. He sneered down at Blinky.

"Well? Aren't you going to go get the seamstress or am I going to be standing up here all bloody day?" Harry said snidely. Blinky didn't make a sound but ran to the front counter to get a seamstress. Draco watched Harry as if he was some kind of insect that needed to be squashed. With a hammer.

"We'll see each other in Hogwarts." The boy said coldly as he got down from his stool. He didn't even look back at Harry as he walked out of the store. Harry's shoulder's drooped slightly in relief. That boy had given him the creeps, especially that last part. It seemed to promise something other than a friendly little visit to the Gryffindor table. No, Harry had the sinking feeling that perhaps he shouldn't have talked to the boy. In fact, he should have avoided him on the street and maintained a wide berth between them. He wasn't sure why, but he had a sinking feeling, a horrible feeling that he wouldn't like the consequences of meeting him.

Harry looked around a bit nervously, watching all of the students whispering to each other. Ron and Hermione, his bodyguards and fellow Gryffindors, kept whispering to each other. Harry heard a few things, such as the fact that Ginny and Neville were missing. He thought briefly about them in his mind. Maybe they had been killed by whatever was petrifying all of the students? Well, if Ginny died he guessed he would act a bit sad for Ron. Honestly, he didn't know her well enough to truly be sad but it was impolite to be impersonal when someone died.

Now, if NEVILLE died then there was going to be utter chaos. The Boy Who Lived had a reputation that could rival that of even the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Lockhart. He was flamboyant and a bit eccentric but overall the man was quite friendly. Harry didn't mind him at all, especially because he never checked homework and when he did, he never really READ it. That was the only reason Harry was doing alright in that class. Compared to Lockhart, even Harry was pretty good! Anyway, Neville also protected him from the Slytherins, especially Draco Malfoy. He had been right to fear the young Malfoy, Harry reflected. The boy was bad news, always trying to get the Gryffindors into trouble, especially expelled.

Why was time passing so slowly? Neville and Ginny should have gotten back by now. Maybe they were dead, a sadistic side of Harry whispered across his mind. Honestly? He didn't much care for them as people. Ginny was such a quiet girl, always in the shadows admiring Neville for always being the hero. The girl needed a life, which she could not have with her brothers constantly acting as bodyguards. She was quite annoying now that he thought about it; her family didn't even have HOUSE ELVES! One thing he would NEVER understand about the Weasleys.

Oh well, that wasn't what he had been thinking about was it? No no, what had he been thinking about? Was it Quiditch? No no, he liked flying but no one dared put him on the team. Frankly, he didn't WANT to be on it. Those Bludgers were known for breaking BONES! Who was to say a Bludger wouldn't come along and break one's neck or make one fall off his or her broom 100 feet to the ground or even more? No, he hadn't been thinking about Quiditch. Oh right! He had decided to visit Hagrid when all of this blew over. IF it blew over. If Ginny and/or Neville died in the Chamber of Secrets then he would have to go back home, which wasn't bad but it wasn't Hogwarts. Much as he loved Mummy Ann, he at least had privacy here.

Suddenly, McGonagall entered the Common Room with a relieved expression on her face. Everyone began to crowd around her, first were Ron and Hermione. Harry stayed a bit in the background, insatiably curious but not so much so that he would get that close to his head of house. McGonagall was never openly hostile like Snape was with Neville but she still scared him.

"May I have everyone's attention please?" What a stupid question. Who would be stupid enough NOT to pay attention? "Thank you; there is very important news that I think you, the students, should be made aware of before you all go to bed. First is that the menace to the school has been found and destroyed. The creature was a Basilisk." There was a sharp intake of breathe taken by all of the people around Harry. He himself shivered and felt like crawling under a rock. He HATED snakes. HATED them so much his skin crawled just thinking about those slimy, disgusting creatures.

"Please students, settle down. The next order of business is that Ms. Ginny Weasley is perfectly alright, though she will be serving some detention time and possible, but not likely expulsion from the school. She was behind the attacks." Everyone gasped again. Harry felt thrown and his face showed it. Ginny? Shy, quiet Ginny who always swooned after Neville for being such a hero? That Ginny could petrify students, a cat and even a GHOST? It didn't sound right. "The punishment for Ms. Weasley will be determined by the Headmaster so please do not pester her with questions." Harry doubted anyone wanted to get that close to Ginny, not after petrifying so many people!

"Also, because Professor Lockhart was such a large help to saving Ms. Weasley, he will be receiving an Order of Merlin Second Class." McGonagall seemed to fight with her own opinions before returning to her usual stern self. "I daresay he will tell you students that he did all the work. I beg that you NOT believe everything you hear. Now, the rules will return to normal after all of this has blown over so I ask that you all return to bed and be patient while we make sure there is no lingering threat. Good night." With that, McGonagall turned and walked out of the Gryffindor tower. Whispers buzzed all around the room once the Head of House had left.

Harry backed up against the compartment of the Hogwarts Express, staring in terror at the dementor sliding towards him quietly. Everyone around him vanished, every sound was gone except a raspy sort of

breathing coming from the. THING. Harry scrambled for his wand instinctively, trying to find a place to hide.

But there was nowhere to hide. He was trapped. And he heard screaming. who was screaming? Was it Ginny or one of the other girls? No. no it wasn't. There was a woman, she sounded so familiar. She was screaming so desperately, and as the creature came closer Harry heard the woman's voice become louder.

"NO! Not my baby! Not my Harry! Give me my baby! PLEASE GIVE HIM BACK TO ME! PLEASE!" There was so much screaming, and he felt so helpless. The screaming, it hurt his ears. but he wanted to get to the woman. He wanted to make her stop crying so hard, but he was trapped. He couldn't move. The creature, it was so close. As it was lowering its skeletal hand towards Harry, the boy crumbled to the floor in a dead faint.

Harry, the real Harry, the one that was master of this body, suddenly seemed to stir. His body remained immobile but his mind awoke. His mind groggily realized that it had not dreamed but that the memories of its counterpart were being pushed into his mind, but where as the first memories had been slower and more drawn out, these were suddenly whipping past at astonishing speed. He wasn't sure why this was happening, why he was only seeing flashes of things that had not happened to him but, in a sense, had.

Here came another memory, so fresh and biting.

He was fourteen and terrified, hiding behind Ron as Hermione threw insults at Malfoy and all of his cronies. Now the Tri Wizard Tournament. he was not in it. But Cedric was. Cedric died. Cedric was the one that brought Voldemort back from his half-death. Now it was the end of the year, and the memories were coming faster, building in pressure. Harry's head felt like it would explode. Umbridge

was there, trying to control the school. She hated Neville. Oh, how she hated the Gryffindors.

Now school was coming to a close, everything was coming together. It was so fast, it was blinding him, he had to make it stop, he had to wake up, he had to WAKE UP!

Harry's head snapped up as he jerked awake, immediately twisting his head when he heard two squeaks of surprise. His hand instinctively searched the nightstand beside him and jammed his glasses onto his nose, giving his audience a piercing look.

A small creature with huge tennis ball eyes and a rag for clothing was staring back at him, leaning forward slightly. Harry felt for a minute that this creature had to be Dobby, the instinct too strong in him. When he took a moment to watch the house elf, he realized that this was Blinky. The house elf from the memories he had just watched was here, sitting in front of him. Suddenly everything became more real.

A disgruntled "ahem" came from just behind the house elf. A woman was staring at him. Her long blond hair was thin and straw-like, pulled into a hasty bun. Her watery blue eyes reminded Harry so sharply of Pettigrew that the hatred was raw on his face, making her recoil as if she had been slapped. They stayed that way, the house elf staring into his face as Harry glared at the woman. He knew who she was. He knew and hated her for who she was and what she had done.

She was Ann Pettigrew; Mummy Ann.

Author's Note (thank yous):

VICIOUS LILY thank you for your review and sorry this took so long. Vacation, midterms and pure laziness has kept this chapter from everyone. ^_^ and don't worry, I'm sure Harry will forgive you. Eventually.

MAETHORIELL UINI TAWAR o.o what a long penname! ^_^ welcome. And no, Mrs. Pettigrew merely spoiled Harry rotten; there are no spells to make Harry the way he is now.

OLIVIA WOOD you have a very good question about Harry reliving his memories. Yes, he is seeing them in his sleep but when he views his memories, he views them in the way of a pensive. Also, because Harry from the Original Universe is seeing these memories, he can understand what Blinky would be thinking out of pure common sense. Also, we wanted to bring in some of Blinky's perspective.

LIME yes, you're quite right. ^_^ very good guesses.

KATA MALFOY aww, don't worry. We never get sick of our reviewers. Sorry for the long delay, as I said there were exams and vacation and I just felt plain lazy. Also, I hope I'll be able to keep updating every week, though I might not be able to. Let's hope so.

ERIEE glad you're enjoying yourself so much. And don't worry, confrontations shall continue, just after this chapter in fact since this is the last of the memories. Hope you enjoy!

KENNY7 these memories were induced from the spells Bellatrix was doing on the ashes of the Alternate Universe Harry. So when Harry wakes up, he's going to have all of his counterpart's memories. Thanks for your question!

JOSE, CATALINA aww, not a dork at all. We'll see what we can do, thanks for your suggestion.

BOOKWORM have no fear, we wouldn't have been cruel enough to put Lily, James and Sirius into Azkaban if we didn't plan to do something about it.

SOLARIS ISA aww, we're still sorry we made you cry. Hopefully not ALL of this story will be so depressing.

JESSI MALFOY *snatches away cookies and stuffs them all in her face before her muses can steal them away* ^_____^ t'ank 'ou!

WANDERINGWOLF well, the experiments that Bellatrix was doing on Alternate Universe Harry's ashes allowed Original Universe Harry to see the memories of his counterpart.

SZELIJ ^_^ yes, Ron and Hermione ARE annoying. Thanks for your review!

TATALINA thanks for the luck, though we didn't do so great. ^_~ not as good as we had wished. Thanks for the luck anyway!

LATEROSE ^_^ heh, yes. Thank you for your review!

BETTY don't worry, our Harry isn't going anywhere, he just happens to have the other Harry's memories now too.

SNUGGS *laughs* well, thank you for your review!

MARZ1 sorry this chapter took so long, there were many obstacles, mostly my own laziness. As for where the memories are coming from, they're from when Bellatrix was doing experiments on Alternate Universe Harry's ashes.

ASHLEE well, thank you for thinking so. ^_^ we thought the house elf's prospective would be a bit more objective since she sees the world as it is instead of biased since Harry is being spoiled so much.

X-GIRL X-FILE ^_^ wow, everyone seems especially interested in the Azkaban thing. Don't worry; we're not going to just leave you in the dark about that.

AIR PIRATE 96 o.o;; please don't spam me. See? New chapter! No spam. Please?

3rd Author's Note: one last thing, Rose69 will no longer be a part of this fic. Our working together was endangering our friendship and so we decided that I - Amber - shall continue this fic alone. She may still help me on occasion but most likely not. Once again, sorry for the delay. I hope to get the next chapter out by next week. And of course, thank you for the wonderful reviews.

Chapter Fourteen: Thorns of the Past

"Harry, oh I'm so glad you're alright!" Mummy Ann said, moving forward to envelope Harry in a hug. She was surprised when he jerked back and onto the floor, grabbing his wand instinctively. Blinky peered at Harry curiously, her huge tennis ball eyes widening a bit more. "Harry. pumpkin what's wrong?"

"S-Stay away from me." Harry said. It wasn't really a threat, more of a warning. He would not hurt her unless she tried to touch him again, which she did. He pointed his wand at her and narrowed his eyes. "I said to stay away from me." He hissed.

"Master Harry, please stop." Blinky said softly. Harry glanced at her and slowly lowered his wand, eyes narrowing a bit.

"I won't harm either of you if you don't touch me."

"H-Harry, sweetie, tell me what's wrong! I'll fix it, are those boys bothering you again? Are they trying to pick on you? I'll have a word with them this time and make SURE they don't worry my sweet little Harrykins." Ann said, giving him a worried look. Harry continued staring at her with narrowed eyes, wand still raised.

"Master Harry?" Harry stared down into extremely expressive eyes. Blinky took his wand hand and slowly lowered his arm for him. "Master Harry, we is not going to hurt you." She said soothingly, petting his knuckles. Harry wanted to draw his arm back and smack her in the face for ignoring his wishes but something, the pleading look in her eyes, the way she gently petted his knuckles or maybe just the flood of memories made him calm down. She was a soothing presence, almost like a mother. like his REAL mother.

"H-Harry?" Ann said a bit jealously.

"I know you. You're Blinky." Harry said, staring down at the house elf and completely ignoring Ann. Ann huffed jealously, eyes widening in surprise as she listened to Harry. "I had a dream about you just now. you were very kind to me and I was a down-right prat to you. I'm sorry." Ann interrupted before Blinky could even open her mouth.

"Harrykins, you don't have to apologize to a house elf! That is their job!"

"A house elf saved my life and you think it's ALRIGHT for me to treat them like dirt beneath my boots?" Harry hisses, his emerald eyes smoldering with rage. Ann's eyes widened and she visibly flinched. Where had her sweet little Harry disappeared to? This person wasn't him! It couldn't be! He would never yell at her like this! And since when had he been saved by a HOUSE ELF? Saved from what?

"Were those bullies after you again?"

"What bullies? Oh right right. you mean Malfoy and them. No, they haven't bothered me." Harry said. One part of him wanted to throw himself into Ann's arms and sob out each and every last problem he had. The other was currently pulverizing that fuzzy self into oblivion. There was no way in hell he was going to be running into ANYONE'S arms. He was still Harry James Potter, HIMSELF..

"Master Harry?" Harry looked down to stare at Blinky. She was still petting his knuckles, eyes a bit wide. "Are you alright sir?"

"I'm fine Blinky." Harry said, managing a weak smile for her.

"You wants to talk with Blinky? Blinky will listen if Master Harry wants her to." She said, looking so heart-wrenchingly sincere that the fuzzy part of him was being pummeled farther. How could his counterpart have been so cruel to hit this house elf? Dobby had been a pretty bad example of a house elf but Blinky. Blinky was the very model of a house elf. Her she was making sure he was alright when he was EXPECTED to hit her for being between him and Ann. She even had one leg off the stool she was standing on, as if she was just waiting for the blow. Instead he reached out his other hand and gently caressed her own fingertips.

"Really Blinky, I'm fine. But I WOULD like to speak to you in private." Blinky stared down at his hands, eyes widened. She had obviously not expected his response nor the fact that he was now comforting HER.

"Why not talk to ME Harry? After all, I'm your Mummy Ann." Ann said, looking clearly jealous now. Harry glared at her before he managed to set a neutral expression on his face.

"I've been unconscious for about a week or so, I've missed all of my classes, I've been having VERY weird dreams, there is a lot going on with me. Excuse me if I'm not polite but get out. I want to talk to Blinky."

"S-She's just a house elf!"

"And if you say that one more time I'm going to curse you until you think she's a human, YOU'RE a bloody Hippogriff and the grass is pink. Now GET OUT." Ann's eyes widened at the threat. She didn't like to admit it, but her Harry wasn't all that clever, especially when it came to insults. He was turning out to be like her Peter. her dear, sweet Peter. But that image died the moment she realized that the burning in those green eyes of his was identical to that determined green in Lily Potter's eyes when she was told she could never see her son again.

Ann slowly walked out the door, turning over this thought in her head. He had always had such sweet and innocent eyes, those that made a person want to hug him and tell him the world was wonderful. Ann knew, of course, the world was savage. After all, she had lost her own son to Voldemort when he had tried to protect her little Harry from those wicked bastards that were his parents. How dare they hit such a sweet baby!

But now. those eyes. it was terrifying to see him staring at her with those haunted eyes. He was older than she could ever dream to be, he had seen things she could only have nightmares about, he knew more than she could ever dare know. Maybe it was best to let him talk to the house elf after all. She didn't want to have those horrible eyes staring down at her because in the back of her mind she would always hear those screams from Lily Potter. always begging to have her son back.

"Master Harry, are you alright?" Blinky asked once Ann had left the hospital wing. Harry slowly sat back on his bed and rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes.

"Not really. but you already know I'm not the Harry YOU know. right?"

"Blinky. has her suspicions. Master Harry is different than she remembers."

"In what way? Aside from my little spectacle just now I would prefer that no one knows that I'm not the Harry they know."

"Blinky still is not sure how Master Harry is different than before. but she knows you are." She said, leaning over to press her hand against his forehead worriedly. She was going to peel off the bandage there but Harry stopped her by gently touching her wrist.

"I'm from another universe. One in which my parents are dead and I am the Boy Who Lived instead of Neville." Harry said softly, eyes still closed. Blinky stared down at him and hesitantly drew her hand back.

"How did you get here?"

"Hermione and Ron did a spell. In my world they're my best friends but they're just plain annoying here. I don't understand it, I never thought they were after my fame or anything. I've escaped Voldemort five times, as in met him in person and managed to escape. Back home I'm at the top of his hit list." Blinky now looked terrified and her hand quickly grabbed for his.

"P-Please don't say the name.."

"I'm sorry Blinky but I've grown accustomed to it." Harry sighed and rubbed his cheek gently. "I just can't fear his name when I've actually SEEN him with my own eyes. The name doesn't seem so frightening after that."

"Did he. hurt you?"

"Oh yes. but not always physically. In my first year I was just rendered unconscious. in my second I was nearly killed by the poison

of a Basilisk fang smashed into my arm, in my fourth year Cedric Diggory was killed because of MY stupidity. oh, and I helped Voldemort rise back from spirit with MY blood. In my sixth year he killed the only person I could honestly call family and he nearly killed me again by possessing my body and mind. All of these things were MY fault because I walked into obvious traps and I couldn't bloody protect anyone!" Harry stopped ranting and was surprised by how relaxed he now felt. He had never ranted like this. not in his entire life. Not really.

"I'm sorry Master Harry. I am." Blinky said. And when Harry turned to stare into her eyes he knew that she was sincere.

"I know you are Blinky but there's nothing to forgive. None of this was your fault; you wouldn't have been able to help me even if you wanted to. I wasn't raised by Ann in my dimension; I didn't even know Pettigrew's mother was still ALIVE then!"

"Pettigrew?"

"Peter Pettigrew. He was the one who told Voldemort where my parents were and got them killed. He had been leaking information to Voldemort for a year."

"Oh. Blinky understands. Blinky will not tell anyone Master Harry's secret. But. who was the house elf that saved your life?"

"Dobby. he must still be working for the Malfoy family. I helped him become free, he was being treated horribly and then he got to work here at Hogwarts."

"You set him free?" Blinky was awed, her eyes widening.

"Yes, I've managed to free two house elves. Dobby was happy beyond belief that I. erm, saved him from the Malfoy family. Winky, however, was not so happy. She was Barty Crouch's house elf. It's a VERY long story and I would rather not go into it."

"Blinky understands. Do you want Blinky to stay with you Master Harry?"

"For a little while I don't mind. I don't want to keep you, Ann might get angry at you. And you're such a good house elf. I'm sorry your real master was so horrible to you. You deserve better."

"N-No Master, really. Blinky is happy to be of service."

"Of course you are. goodnight for now Blinky." Harry said. He closed his eyes again, surprised that his rant had drained him so easily. But he could feel himself getting better, stronger. Tomorrow he would be up and around, probably returning to classes. Now, he wouldn't be behaving as Hermione and Ron wanted anymore. He was his own damned self and he would let them know he was not to be toyed with or commanded. He would be careful not to change all at once, but a little taste of his true self would be just the medicine to heal him completely tomorrow.

Author's Note (thank yous):

SONDY thank you so much. I'm glad you're enjoying the fic so much.

DARCEY well, I'm glad you get to read THIS chapter too. ^_^ welcome.

KATA MALFOY Aww, everyone's lazy; it's part of our charm. And don't you worry about the Harry and his parents, I promise there WILL be something to do with that very soon actually. Just hang tight.

KATEYDIDNT ^^ here's another chapter. Was it good?

LIME well, I hope the conversation WAS interesting.

W'RKNCACNTER o.o wow, what an interesting penname; and here's chapter 15.

TAT good, I'm glad you found the part about the other Harry interesting. I love a reviewer who knows what's going on.

ROMM *laughs* interesting point. Yes, Harry IS justifiably paranoid.

WANDERINGWOLF o.o wow, demanding aren't you? And don't worry, the memories ended, as I said, in the last chapter. ^_^ but here's the new stuff, enjoy!

STARRDANCERR I'm glad you're enjoying the story so much. And welcome.

KENNY7 good! The whole point is to hate the Pettigrews. I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

SZELIJ o.o oh well what?

MALFOY'S BEST FRIEND O.O gah! Butter knife! okay okay! New chapter! ^_^ hehehe, welcome aboard.

ERIEE Well, here was a nice little snapping scene and don't worry, this is only the beginning. There will be a lot more of these soon. But I've been getting sick and tired of writing the memories also.

KRAZY JADE O.O wow. thank you! ^__^ I'm so glad you're enjoying the fic so much. And yes, I will be updating regularly. ^^;; if I can remember, I have so much work to do I might accidentally forget. So if I'm lagging on updates please tell me and I'll remember.

SALLYMANDER ^_^ I have updated soon! Glad you like the fic.

MARZ1 *laughs* I love your enthusiasm. And as I've said, I'm now VERY close to Azkaban, so don't you worry. I just have to go through a few more chapters. And there will be plenty of confrontations, Snape ones included.

MAETHORIELL UINI TAWAR o.o the link doesn't work. I'd read your stories but the link doesn't work. ^^;; I'm sorry.

LIGHTNING RAIN O.O *snatches chocolate and stuffs it into her mouth* ^__^ 'hank 'ou!

TATALINA O.O more chocolate! ^__^ I love my reviewers. Thank you ever so much!

OLIVIA WOOD ^_^ I have updated. I hope you like.

X-GIRL X-FILE ^____^ wow, such great responses. Thank you everyone!

BOOKWORM glad you're enjoying the fic. And you'll have to wait and see what happens.

LATEROSE o.o I am your rival? *smirks and bows* greetings then, and be prepared for my challenges because I am a master of cliffhangers. Mummy Ann: no! It hurts! Don't do it! AHHHHHH! Me: ^^;; oh dear, you've killed my muse. Not to worry, you can kill her again. My muses ALWAYS come back.

Chapter Fifteen: Merry Christmas Harry

Classes had begun anew and Harry was surprised that no one cared that he had been gone for a week or so, maybe dead or dying. But no one even looked at him or even asked why he wore a tight bandage over his forehead, right over his scar. No "Harry, are you feeling better?" or "Why are you all bandaged up?" They all just ignored him as if he was a bug on the wall: irritating but not worth squishing.

What they DID notice, strangely, was that Harry ignored Neville, Hermione and Ron during all of his classes and out of them. Even when Harry and Neville had remedial Potions at the same time, Harry would go so far as to sit beside a bewildered Slytherin than be caught anywhere near Neville. The Slytherins were baffled, the Gryffindors were outraged, the Ravensclaws were intrigued and the Hufflepuffs were oblivious as usual. Neville had tried everything to get Harry's attention; he didn't understand why doing so had become his life's obsession, it used to be the other way around. Harry doing everything in his power to magnetize Neville to him but never receiving quite succeeding. Only Harry didn't seem quite as flattered as Neville had when their roles had been reversed.

Neville had even gone so far as to stretch a lie he had never attempted trying before: describing Voldemort's appearance to their Potions class. He said that Voldemort was a very tall, pale man with oily black hair and coal black eyes, explaining how his presence struck fear into the hearts of all around them. Harry tried to hide the smirk that threatened to overwhelm his face as he listened to Neville enrapture the class. Voldemort was not Severus Snape, despite Neville's quite believable description of Voldemort using Snape as a reference. Snape also seemed to be fighting a losing battle with his smirk and his reputation; to smirk wickedly and terrify the students or remain silent and sneak up on those two gossiping Gryffindor girls.

Harry ignored the students as best he could, though he made sure to pay special attention to the teachers for two reasons; the first was his desire to focus on his studies and the second was to occupy his mind from the conflicting memories crashing in his head.

He knew that the Boy Who Lived, his true self, hated Herbology and loved flying on a broom hundreds of feet above the ground. The other Harry in his head, incidentally, was convinced that he was no good at flying and therefore hated flying. This Harry always lent a gentle knowledge of plants when he was in Herbology and touched each plant with the delicacy of one holding a newborn baby. Needless to say, Professor Sprout was overjoyed to be teaching her prize student again. She caught him one day (three days before Christmas) after class had been dismissed and she had smiled sheepishly when he turned to look at her.

"Don't be alarmed boy; I don't intend to get you into any kind of trouble. I merely wanted to say that your work has vastly improved Mr. Potter. I am very impressed with your marks." Her face softened a bit, making the wrinkles around her eyes stand out visibly on the corners of her face, especially because of the light layer of dirt on them. "Your mother would be proud."

Harry felt his fingers curl around his books, eyes narrowing at the comment. "Yes, I would hope my MOTHER would be proud." Sprout tried not to show the sudden fear curdling her stomach. She tried to remember if he had always been able to hiss his words like that. Like a snake.

"House pride aside, I sometimes wish you had been in Hufflepuff. You would have done well there." The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end when he smiled at her.

"I am afraid, Professor Sprout, that the Sorting Hat would disagree with you. It wanted to send me to Slytherin." Sprout felt the overwhelming need to touch her wand. She didn't want to use it; just to make sure she could reach it and use it if she had to. In case a snake attacked her. Harry's face suddenly softened into a friendly smile. "Thank you for the thought though. It doesn't seem I belong in either house." Reaching across her, he picked up her wand and handed it to her. "You mustn't forget this; wouldn't want to be attacked unarmed in these dangerous times."

He walked away from her with his books held loosely to his side by one hand and the other hand thrust into his pocket harmlessly. He

looked so innocent then, with his back turned to her and invoked with the complete confidence that she wouldn't curse him from behind.

Sprout felt immensely guilty for holding her wand in a threatening way. She knew that the boy couldn't possibly be her student, he had changed so much, and he was aware she noticed the change. He seemed to be depressed about it.

Harry sighed inwardly after he had walked away from Professor Sprout, his shoulders drooping a bit. He had been overworking himself, rising first each morning and always being the last out of the library (when Madam Pince threatened to chase him out with a broom) but no matter how hard he worked himself, the other Harry's voice was there, whining about the workload or trying to distract him during one of his classes. Arguments in his mind became daily occurrences and Harry always had to catch himself from speaking aloud.

- It's time to get up. -

- No . . . warm bed. Sleep some more. -

- Shut up you stupid prat. -

Harry reluctantly allowed the other Harry to take over sometimes but it bothered him that he had to do the most work: remedial classes, dealing with the Slytherin bullies, constantly thinking ahead and looking for a way back to his own world. He was having especially productive progress in his Ancient Runes class. He stayed afterwards, researched for hours in the library and before bed, trying to find a way to link the spells together to make a portal to his universe. This was harder than it sounded, however.

Stringing together a bunch of runes had one of three effects: nothing could happen, anything could happen, or both. Harry had tried to mix a long string of time runes and transportation and had experimented with an apple. When he wrote the runes using his index and middle finger, the words had burned into the air like a dying flame; the colors of the deepest pale blue. He had been intelligent enough to attach the runes for "apple" that directed the spell towards said apple, or

else he probably would have just created a reason for the Ministry of Magic to throw him permanently into Azkaban.

The apple disappeared when he cast the spell. Unfortunately, when the apple reappeared a week later, it was completely deformed, wasted away with a strange etched on the apple's surface. He took time to examine and research this as well, and after sneaking into the Restricted Section of the library one night, he found that the symbol belonged to a deity called Cronus, the keeper of time. Harry felt a shudder go through his body when he realized that this deity was probably VERY pissed off at him and as much as he wanted to go home, he put off experimenting with runes for a long while afterwards.

Hermione and Ron were worthless as informants and study partners since they were so terrified of being caught in the same room as Harry, fearing that everyone would suddenly become mind-readers and see through them. As if they were made of glass. So Harry was forced to work alone; studying books and people, watching Neville make an ass of himself while somehow managing to stay alive. He must be extremely lucky; Harry kept telling himself in awe.

Christmas day dawned gray, cold and annoyingly cheerful. Harry suffered through a bout of *déjà vu* in which he received socks (from Mummy Ann) and nothing else; no letters from Sirius, no gifts from Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley, or anyone else. Ron had gone home to visit his family and Hermione had gone to France with her own family. That meant that Harry was alone with the pink ("salmon") socks and a sappy note from Mummy Ann, also written in pink ink.

He crumpled the letter and tossed it into the fireplace. He watched it burn with morbid interest. The silence was a nice change from the constant chaos surrounding his roommates. Nothing but the crackling of the fire and the soft snoring of the sleeping students were his only companions. Harry had noticed this immediately when he woke up on Christmas day, this heightening of his senses. Unfortunately this meant that his eyes had improved but were not perfect, so his glasses now made him dizzy because the prescription was too strong. Harry wasn't completely sure why his senses were being sharpened; all he knew was that since a part of him had been dead, his entire being was expanded and then rudely snapped back together by a

spell, probably the same one that had forced the other Harry and his memories into him in the first place.

Sitting there, alone during Christmas without even the Dursleys or Hedwig for company, Harry's thoughts were surprisingly bittersweet. His "dead" self had seen other dead people including Moaning Myrtle and the terrifying Basilisk. But the disappointment of not seeing the ghost of his dead parents took precedence over his intense curiosity about death. Even in spirit form they were out of his grasp; they were not looking out for him, waiting with open arms.

Becoming increasingly depressed knowing that he couldn't escape his own life, not even in death. Harry dumped his pink socks on the top of his trunk and walked towards the Great Hall. When he was halfway there, he noticed a hunched figure behind a suit of armor, mumbling to itself. Harry recognized the creature's little mantra ("Must iron hands when Dobby gets home for this") and peered down at the little house elf, Dobby. But what was he doing here instead of at Malfoy Mansion? As he had said, he would have to iron his hands for being there unless he had been specifically ordered to go to Hogwarts with one of the Malfoys, which didn't seem to be the case.

"Excuse me, can I help you?" Harry said as politely as he could. Dobby jumped as if a scorpion had been placed on his shoulder. Dobby swept his arms back and bowed down low so that the tip of his nose touched the stone floor.

"Master Potter, D-Dobby is pleased to meet you sir. Blinky asked Dobby to come see if sir was having a Happy Christmas." Harry felt his heart melt at those words. Maybe he wasn't alone for Christmas anymore. He'd thought he would have to spend it alone, with those infernal pink socks. Maybe that was why Dumbledore was so nutty? He'd lived so long with only a pair of socks for company that he'd gone stark raving mad and that was why he'd told Harry once that he would have preferred socks over books. "Master Potter? Blinky is in the kitchens sir, she and the other house elves have made a feast for you sir." Dobby said nervously when Harry didn't reply right away. Dobby expected to be hit or yelled at or maybe even completely ignored but instead Harry just seemed to be smiling wider.

"Come on Dobby; let's see what Blinky made for us shall we?" He said it with such warmth that Dobby felt his insides melting. The "us" and the "we" . . . he spoke of them as . . . as EQUALS. Dobby gave Harry a huge smile, for once forgetting that he would have to iron his hands as punishment for helping Blinky in this way. He knew now, staring at that childishly happy face that it was all worth it. He led Harry proudly to the kitchens, parading him as a commander would his latest trophy.

An owl swooped into Dumbledore's office and deposited a letter onto the oak desk of the wizened Headmaster. The seal on the letter was black wax with three bars vertically placed with a key etched across them: the crest of Azkaban. Inside the innocent letter were written several hasty words under which the keeper of Azkaban had signed his signature and cast a quick spell to insure Dumbledore would know the name had not been forged.

To all concerned,

Sirius Black, James Potter and Lily Potter have escaped from Azkaban. Take all precautions to ensure the safety of Mr. Harry Potter as these three murderers may go after him. Use extra caution; they are armed and extremely dangerous.

Best Regards,

Buford Bumbudile.

Author's Note (thank yous):

FUNKYWITCHONFIRE ^^ thank you!

LIGHTENING RAIN ^^ yay! Thanks for the chocolate, sorry for the delay.

IBOZUN O.O you read them all so quickly? Wow, I'm impressed. Glad you're enjoying yourself.

WANDERINGWOLF o.o;; oh yes, VERY demanding. Heh, but here's the chapter everyone's been dying for! James, Lily and Sirius are free. Please tell me what you think.

KATA MALFOY Your favorite? I'm flattered. please tell me what you think so far.

SIRI CAT well, there you go! Your wish has been fulfilled.

ALLYANNA sorry this took so long, please enjoy!

siripiritus again, sorry this took so long. School = hell and late updating.

GALLANDRO-83 ^;;; thankfully I've talked to you about most of this stuff. I think I would be giving too much away if I answered ALL of those questions you asked in your review, plus I would like to get this chapter out tonight.

MARZ1 *dramatically* there! Azkaban. ^^ probably not what you expected. But yes, Blinky IS abused by Ann.

AIR PIRATE 96 o.o *cautiously posts chapter* please don't spam me. my mailbox is full as it is.

LATEROSE glad you're enjoying the chapter, and there will be a LOT of stuff happening now. This is the GOOD stuff! Trust me, I've been dying to write this part since I started the story.

LADY SHANG glad you're enjoying yourself.

JESSI MALFOY O.O SEVEN cookies?! *salivates* okay. here we go. One for you. *gives cookie to Harry* one for you *gives one to Blinky who gives hers to Harry* one for you *gives cookie to Sirius who gives it to Harry* one for you *gives cookie to James who gives it to Lily who gives it to Harry* one for you *gives cookie to Lily who gives it to James who gives it to Harry* one for you *gives cookie to Dobby who hurriedly gives it to Harry* and one for you! ^^ *gives the last cookie to Faith, blinks when she sees Harry scarfing down the rest of

them* so you see? When I fail, it will be entirely my fault. Because I love you guys so much. :P

OROME1 well, if I told you if Harry was going back to his world, I'd have to kill you. No one knows for sure. only me and my old beta.

SPASH PANTHER ^^ glad you think so. Enjoy!

ETHOS o.o *blushes* ^____^ glad you think so.

UNKNOWN sorry for the delay in chapters.

MIYA-CHAN3 ^^ you'll have to wait and see.

Chapter Fifteen: Have Faith

Walking down the streets of Hogsmeade, Harry walked with his hands in his robe pockets and his scarf protecting him from the cold of the snow falling around him. The party of the house elves had been wonderful with delicious pies and roasts smoked to perfection. The pumpkin juice was lightly spiked so that a warm buzz filled Harry's body as he laughed and talked with Blinky and other house elves. After they stopped begging if there was anything they could do for him (which took about two hours) they were quite interesting. Harry managed to pry some information about their families and how they came to work at Hogwarts. He also discovered that there were certain paintings that were good for conversation and directions (secretly noting this for further research later).

Eventually he realized that the house elves wanted him to leave without wanting to be rude either. They had to prepare the Christmas feast for those few still remaining in the castle and they wanted to out-do themselves. Harry felt his heart melt when a house elf told him why they worked so hard for the feasts. "We wants the students to come back and be jealous of the students who got to eats the feast. We wants the students to WANT to stay... so that theys can eat the feast we makes." He was so PROUD... so proud of doing this for them. Harry felt a deep guilt for never noticing how hard the house elves truly worked.

Mind returning to the gray slush that had been snow only two days ago, Harry stomped his foot to return feeling to his numb toes. He turned down the alley between Zonkos and another little pub where couples were exchanging gifts and kisses. The glamour and sparkle of Hogsmeade became the poverty and slums of London in the alleys behind the shops. Harry was vaguely reminded of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, a book he'd read the year before he went to Hogwarts. He'd revisited it during the summer of his fourth year and enjoyed it tremendously, but at the moment he was awed that his own little magical town reminded him so strongly of it. There was no one there, but he couldn't shake the feeling that eyes were upon him.

There was a crash and Harry whirled around, wand outstretched and a curse on the tip of his tongue. A man in an apron had come out and

dumped a large black trash bag onto the floor, breaking the glass that was evidently in the bag. Swallowing his heart before it managed to escape through his throat, Harry turned back to continue on his exploration.

He walked for about an hour but soon found himself in the same place he had started his little trek in the miniature maze. When he was prepared to retreat to the castle and into his warm bed, he heard very soft crying; so soft that he could barely decipher the sound. He started looking for it.

There it was again; that soft scraping sound followed by a child's soft crying. The instinctive protector in Harry sought out the sound, turning over trash bins filled with half-eaten Cauldron Cakes and broken mugs still dropping with Butterbeer.

"Come out little one, I won't hurt you." Harry called out soothingly. He was answered by a pitiful cry. The scraping sound came from a trash bin he hadn't touched yet. He hesitantly went to it and lifted the lid, and almost vomited. There, in a pile of rotting meat were five dead kittens. One was decomposing, another was half eaten, two were missing heads, and the last had no paws. Harry had never, NEVER witnessed something like this before in his entire life. As horrible as it was, finding these five dead kittens was worse than watching people die. People committed sins, they were good people with some skeletons in their closets but kittens couldn't hurt anything, not even themselves. And someone had left them in a trash can.

Something poked its head out from under one of the kittens that was missing a head. A brown kitten with white flecks of muck and shit covering the creature's body stared up at Harry with immense blue eyes that immediately stole his heart from out of his chest. That explained the half eaten kitten; the poor creature had to eat its sibling in order to survive. Without thinking, Harry reached down and retrieved the kitten, bundling it into his robes to keep it warm as he hurried towards the castle. He didn't know what he would do with himself if the kitten were to die.

The kitten was, in fact, white as snow once the grime had been cleaned off her coat. And yes, she was a girl (Harry had reluctantly checked so that he wouldn't name the kitten something that wouldn't be correct for her gender). She was quite friendly and loved to eat, meowing pitifully for more until she was literally too stuffed to do anything but lie down and sleep. She purred when she had her ears stroked against the grain of her fur. Harry felt that he was falling in love.

This was a bad development for his plans so he quickly (and reluctantly) thought of anyone he could send the kitten to as a present so that he wouldn't be tied down if and when he left this dimension. He went through everyone in his head, considering the possibilities and outcomes. Much as the thought of getting rid of the adorable creature assailed his conscience (and his secret love for all things small and furry), he knew the creature would only die if kept around him. After all, everyone ELSE had already died.

Neville was completely out of the question. In his real universe he would have been the first and probably the only one truly worthy of her. She needed someone to take care of her and Neville was always so careful with animals, even if he did lose Trevor constantly. But it made sense since Neville had never really wanted a toad but he had been forced to have one; naturally his own magic pushed the creature away. Subconsciously Neville must have hoped the poor creature would take up residence in the lake and live happily ever after. This way, Neville would be able to get an owl or a cat. Unfortunately, that Neville was not here and in his place was an asshole. So the kitten would have to go to someone else.

Hermione already had a cat and, quite frankly, Harry couldn't see Hermione taking the kitten and not being somewhat suspicious that she was jinxed. Harry was the equivalent of evil to her since he symbolized her academic ruin if anyone were to find out what a blunder she had committed in bringing him from his own dimension. Crookshanks was alarmingly territorial, so sending a very young kitten made the idea seem worse than just the issues with Hermione. So the book worm was out of the equation.

Ron? Well, considering the way he treated Scabbers (never mind the rat was absolute evil and the fact that Ron HAD been upset about Crookshanks “eating” him) Harry just couldn’t bring himself to give his precious little friend to someone so self absorbed. He’d read somewhere that a lot of animals took on their master’s qualities and appearances (or vice versa, he couldn’t quite remember) and the thought of the sweet little kitten becoming an egotistical prat didn’t sit well with Harry. Also, Ron could sometimes become very absent-minded. He might forget to feed her or play with her! So no, he wouldn’t get her either.

He had barely talked to the Ginny of this universe or the Luna of this universe either. He went through some other people in his head (Seamus, Dean, Parvati, Lavender, Cho, Cedric) and he even toyed with the idea of giving her to a professor (Pomphrey, Sprout, McGonagall, Dumbledore, Flitwick, Figg, and even Snape) before he realized that he was being far too picky. But he couldn’t help it! He wanted to give the kitten a good home, something that he had never had. Just WHO?

Suddenly, as if to answer his question, he remembered a conversation he had overheard between Zambini (a Slytherin) and Malfoy. They were on their way to their dorms when Zambini started bragging about his cat.

“She’s a Persian; pure bred and worth almost a thousand Galleons. Her collar is, of course, made from the finest silver and diamonds. It is worth about ten thousand Galleons. Mother made sure she was of the highest pedigree. Why, her ancestry can be traced back to the rulers of Persia just before the Punic Wars!”

“Blaise, do you even know what the Punic Wars WERE?” Malfoy had said gruffly. His attitude suggested that he wasn’t content with the conversation but rather was grumpy about something or other. “Anyway, what does it matter? A cat is a cat is a cat.” He seemed to catch himself and sneered, drawing himself up. “Mother promised to buy me a kitten. That way I’ll have both an owl and a cat... let’s see how Dumbledore feels about THAT.”

Harry hadn't thought about it at the time, but now as he sat in the Gryffindor Tower gently petting the kitten (whom was tasting his fingers and trying to sink her tiny fangs into his nails) he realized how much cats and snakes seemed to mesh. Slytherins usually resembled, or at least behaved like snakes because of their nature and the nature of their House. Snake were polite, ruthless, arrogant, self-centered creatures out for themselves though their loyalties were impossible to break. Cats were the same; the owner did not have a cat, the cat had an owner. Cats had, after all, been kings in Egypt at the start of civilization.

Much as his mind was screaming for him not to, he contemplated sending Malfoy the kitten. First, it would surprise the hell out of him, amusing Harry. Second, it might soften the cruel boy by taking care of an obviously innocent creature. Teasing others was one thing but hurting a defenseless kitten was another. Harry just couldn't imagine Malfoy hurting her. Anyway, he didn't have to say it was from him. If his mother was really going to send him a kitten then why shouldn't Harry save her the trouble and help himself at the same time? Anyway, he had run out of options and Malfoy was the only one who Harry hadn't rejected outright. It was a risk, but he had to. He couldn't keep her, much as he wanted to. He had other duties to attend to and becoming attached wasn't something that would help him.

Staring down into her huge blue eyes, he finally made his decision.

"What the bloody hell is this?" Draco muttered when he found a basket under his Christmas tree. His parents had gone to Romania for Christmas and left him at school for the first time in years. He was surprised they had even remembered to tell him that they would be away since they were usually absent-minded about reminding him of such things. But something about this gift (with his mother's name scribbled on it) seemed off. The fact that the gift was ALIVE was what made it off.

The first thing the kitten did upon seeing him was meow in a pitiful little "love me!" way. And it stole his heart. And he wanted it back. But

it didn't want to GIVE it back! He panicked for a bit, wondering what in hell his mother thought she was doing. True, he'd fibbed about getting a kitten (mostly because he wanted one so badly) and yet here it was. The universe wasn't without a sense of irony.

Draco remembered that he was angry with his mother and father for leaving him here while everyone else was home so he decided to extract his revenge. If he was to be truly bloodthirsty and ruthless, he couldn't be going home after killing a bunch of Muggles to a cat that had his heart trapped somewhere and who didn't want to give it back. So he made a quick decision and prepared to prove to himself once and for all that he shouldn't question his family's intentions anymore.

Going to the window on which a pile of snow had gathered, he placed the kitten there and left it there with the window closed. The wind howled and shook the glass, making the fur on the kitten's back stand on end. It meowed pitifully to him, gently pawing at the window and staring at him with those damned blue eyes. So blue... so pitiful. He let the poor creature stay there for only a moment before he couldn't take it anymore and quickly brought it back in.

Bundling it in his robes, he felt it start purring, nuzzling his hands as he reluctantly petted the shivering creature. He couldn't believe what a weakling he was. He delighted in the idea of killing people but he couldn't let a damned kitten freeze. What did that say about his character as a Malfoy? Sitting by the fire, Draco continued petting the kitten. He rummaged through the basket it had come in and finally found a small tag that read "Her name is Faith". That was far more sentimental than his mother normally was. She would only be like that when she was sarcastic. But still... words on paper were different from words spoken. If her name was Faith then that was what Draco would call her.

"You little albino rat." Draco said affectionately, rubbing behind her ears and secretly delighting when she closed her eyes and purred. He could almost hear his heart screaming up at him from under the mountains of affection he was developing for her. "Don't tell anyone, but you're the best Christmas present I've ever gotten."

Chapter Seventeen: Ravings of the Mad

"Lily, are you SURE you're warm enough with just that blanket? Sirius and I can go get another one if you're not."

"I'm FINE James! Really; sleeping in a freezing cell for years would imply that one blanket is more than enough for me." A thin, frail woman with knotted blood red hair sat shivering in an alcove beside slightly rusted train tracks. They were deep within the London underground in one of the abandoned tunnels where young wizards had been taught magic during the Second World War since traveling was dangerous. The abandoned station was, yet again, a refuge from those who needed rest from their plight.

A tall man with ragged black hair that vaguely resembled a crow's nest and eyes sunken into parchment yellow skin paced nervously in front of the woman with the red hair and the man with chocolate, sad eyes. The man pressed his broken glasses higher on the bridge of his nose, wrapping a warm arm around his wife's bony shoulders. He could remember a time when he had fondly mentioned that she was getting a little thick around the hips, never meaning anything by it really, just a little joke to tease her. She had chased him around the kitchen, smacking him at odd intervals with a wooden spoon. Now... she was so thin that he was afraid she might slip through his fingers without difficulty. She would slip through his fingers like a spider... poor, beautiful red spider; inching up his hand, crawling from his protective watch over her.

"I wonder how Harry is." Lily whispered worriedly, wringing her skeletal-like hands over and over. James snapped out of his daze and then chided himself for allowing the madness of Azkaban to take over his mind briefly. He didn't think he would ever be completely sane ever again, but he could somewhat control his bouts of madness just like Sirius could; just like Lily could... to a degree of course. The dementor had affected her worst of all three of them because her memories seemed to have been the happiest of them. Her parents had not beaten her for having Gryffindor friends and her parents had not been killed before her very eyes. No, her parents had loved her, perhaps too much. Petunia hated her so.

"Lily, James, stop staring into space like that." Sirius said firmly. Both of them jerked back at the sound of their friend's voice and they turned to stare up at him like pitiful children caught doing a bad deed. Sirius had taken imprisonment better than both of them though he had his share of happy memories sapped out of his body over the years. But he had not lost a child as they had and so he was better off, or at least that was what he kept telling himself.

He came to kneel in front of both of them, taking their pale, spider-like hands and held firmly to them. "Don't forget where you are. I'm still here and I'll take care of both of you." He said fiercely, staring into their eyes with his soul bared to them. He had placed them into this position, he told himself, so it was his responsibility to get them safely out of there and to their son. That was the way it was supposed to be. Parents should never be separated from their child, at least not when they love their child as deeply as the two Potters loved their little Harry. Well, after so many years he probably wasn't little at all. In fact, he was probably a teenager now.

"James I'm scared." Lily whispered, breaking through the fragmented thoughts that Sirius was slowly drowning in. He snapped to attention and stared worriedly at the frail woman. She was shaking despite the rather generous blanket they had received when a missionary had seen them and thought they were homeless. Sirius wasn't a man of the Church, but he wouldn't say anything bad about charity anymore. He could still remember making fun of missionaries when he and James were younger.

"It's alright angel, I'm right here. I'll take care of you." James whispered into Lily's ear. Now that he was touching her, closer to her, could feel her warmth and her life, he felt himself feel saner. She felt more real and less of a blissful moment that occurred every few years when Azkaban was driving its prisoners mad. The island of dementors had a mind of its own and a hollow soul of its own. Completely sane and capable men and women were sent there only for them to go wild with hallucinations and scream at the soft whispering of voices inside cracked minds. Many fearfully called this place the Heart of Darkness.

“Do you think Harry will be alright? Won’t they send him away if they knew that we were free?” Lily whispered softly, burying her face in her husband’s shoulder. She felt surprisingly warmer, as if she had drunken a bottle of butterbeer and was feeling the effects even in the tips of her toes. “I don’t want them to do anything to Harry just to find us.”

“It’s not likely that they will since he’s an ordinary student. Dumbledore wouldn’t stand for a student being placed into turmoil just to catch someone after that child. And we’re not really AFTER Harry, we’re just checking up on him.” Sirius said, trying to soothe her. He ended up making her only more agitated.

“Just check on him? No no! I want to have my little boy back! They had no right to take him away from me! I want my baby back!” She was on the verge of tears before James soothingly kissed her lips to silence her. When she had calmed enough to breath normally, he pulled back and stared directly into her large green eyes. He loved those beautiful eyes; they had been the first things he had fallen in love with.

“We are going to check on him first. If... if he is happy, than we will let him remain where he is without taking him back.” James said with a firmness to his voice that was so unlike the old James who used to joke about everything. Lily despaired at the completely strict look he was giving her. “Lily that is all we can do. We want Harry to be happy... and if he IS happy where he is than it would be a sin to remove the poor boy. But if he is NOT happy or if he is willing to come with us, than perhaps we could clear our names and we could live together again. Shh my beautiful Lily, everything will be alright. I promise.”

Lily laughed weakly, glaring at him with a slightly pained look. “James, everything will never be alright. Don’t promise such a thing.”

“But everything WILL work out.” Sirius said quickly, watching both of them with a puppy-like eagerness. “We’ll kill the traitor and clear our names, and Harry will want to see you both I’m sure. Any child would want to see his parents if he’d never known them! You’ll live in Godric’s Hollow again, he’ll understand. He’ll be in Gryffindor; he’ll be

so SMART too. And I bet he'll play pranks just like we did! Everything will be fine. Everything will be fine." James nodded vehemently.

In truth, both men knew that everything would NOT be fine. They were trying to convince not only Lily but also themselves that this outrageous fantasy could in fact become reality. For all they knew Harry could have been taken to the Americas, joined one of those gangs that Americans were so famous for and killed ten people, sending HIM to a prison there. They didn't know anything at all, except what Sirius had found in the newspapers as a dog. If a stag were to have been running around the streets of London, someone was sure to notice. Lily was not permitted to go unless accompanied by either James or Sirius, but usually only Sirius went since Lily's face was known and she could not turn into an animal.

When they had escaped Azkaban, Sirius had been the first to slip through the bars. Then, as a dog, he went to James' cell and managed to speak some coherence into his soft ramblings. The icy fear had finally begun to seep through his defenses but at the sight of Padfoot, he had found a new strength. Turning into Prongs was difficult but necessary since neither had any keys and leaving James or Lily behind was not on Sirius' agenda. In the end, James barreled through his cell and then Lily's, managing to scoop up his unconscious wife and the three escaped. Lily had almost been their downfall since the dementors could sense a human but not animals but they managed to escape even with her. Living off berries and questionable fruits, Lily managed to become conscious though she raved for almost the entirety of their escape. When they had first entered the London Underground she had begun to come back to herself and to calm her raving thoughts.

Harry had, of course, been the dominating factor in their conversations but it was mostly a depressing topic that made them all too aware of their current situation. They were fugitives, half insane, trying to find a man who was presumed dead (but who wasn't) and hoping to find a teenaged boy who would probably run at the sight of them because of the stories told about their "crimes".

The one to find out that Peter Pettigrew, Wormtail, Scoundrel of the Planet, was Sirius. He had been whispering to Lily through the bars of

his cell (she was having a nightmare and he was trying to soothe her since James was in a cell too far away to speak with her) when he recalled that Peter had told James that he would be in the Three Broomsticks the night that Lily and James were arrested for doing... things to Harry. He didn't want to think about those absurd charges. He had gone to speak to Peter, surprised that Harry had been taken to Peter's mother of all people and he went to see if Peter had somehow changed the Potter will (which was not likely but maybe if Sirius could be casual, he could convince Peter to tell him why such a switch had been mad). He found that Peter was speaking to a man in a black cloak and wearing a white mask; a Death Eater. He had caught slivers of the conversation, mainly dealing in the fact that the Potters were now in Azkaban and Harry would be easy prey now.

Sirius had been so angry when he heard the two men conversing about the fate of his godson that he had gone into a rage. The Death Eater had escaped but Sirius managed to harm Peter fairly badly before the little rat escaped into the Muggle street he lived on (for his own protection as the Secret Keeper, Dumbledore had suggested that Peter move to the Muggle part of London). There, Peter had framed Sirius and escaped, but Sirius had seen him. And he remembered what had happened while he was in Azkaban. While he was there he also was able to inform Lily and James of this, and the fact that they had been set up somehow made them remain sane. Lily had been losing her mind when Sirius had been brought in and James was already having horrible nightmares. When they heard the news they became grimmer, quieter, but they could hold entire conversations again. Many times they avoided the topic of Harry because it was such a painful subject. When they did talk about Harry, however, the dementors tended to drift away. The subject now held no happiness to feast on and there were fresher, livelier prisoners with the life's bread that the dementors needed and craved. The three suffered for years, never really knowing the time that passed but managing to keep sanity between them.

Then the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, came to oversee the prisoners of Azkaban prison. While passing James's cell, he stopped to speak to him. James had worked as an Auror and had been among the best the Ministry had ever had. He had been a clever man, though a little too playful at times, with a sharp mind and an eye for

detail. The man's father had been a Minister of Magic as well, so he felt a bit of pity for him. He was surprised by how quiet and yet perfectly sane he was.

When James had requested to see the newspaper that Fudge held, and so the Minister agreed (out of charity, he told himself later). James had scanned the headlines as the Minister left, and when he saw the rat that had placed him in Azkaban sitting on a certain Ronald Weasley's shoulder, he became livid with rage. He was not even fully aware of what he was doing.

When the dementors came to serve him dinner, James forcibly exited his cell after having pried off a metal bar that nailed his bed to the stone floor. He was, obviously, affected by the dementor's presence but his anger and hatred was so pure that happiness could not be sucked out of him; and anger is a fuel that men can live off, for a time. James managed to escape, almost finding his freedom until dementors found him a few hours later trying to come around the back way to help Lily and Sirius escape as well. He was placed farther from his wife for this reason. Azkaban had been in an uproar (not to mention the rest of the wizarding world) when it was found that James Potter had almost escaped Azkaban when no prisoner had been able to before.

The incident became known as the Azkaban Scare of 1993.

"Come on... we can't stay." Sirius whispered softly. The distant trains rumbled through their cozy tunnels, echoing through the deserted station. Lily stood, leaning her head against James's shoulder briefly before starting the trek deeper into the tunnels. James and Sirius exchanged a look before following closely behind her. They also checked behind themselves. After all, just because they were paranoid did not mean that the world wasn't out to get them.

Chapter Eighteen: Cry of the Augurey

Harry stood in front of Hagrid's hut, silently delighting in the rain pouring over him, dripping from his nose and covering his glasses completely. Once, he had hated the rain. The rain meant Dudley slamming him into puddles of mud and attempting to break his nose on the concrete. Rain meant Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon sending him out to garden and not giving him so much as a towel to dry himself when he came in. He became the most ill when it rained. The rain meant no sunlight when he left his cramped little cupboard and having to deal with his relatives's grouchy disposition since they too did not enjoy the rain.

After coming to Hogwarts, he found that he became more relaxed when it was raining. He could huddle under a large blanket in the Gryffindor tower, curl up like a cat by the fireplace and just unwind with Quditich Through the Ages. He had often fallen asleep listening to the gentle beat of the rain against his window. So Harry stood in the rain and enjoyed himself while the rest of his class attempted to hide under the over cropping roof of Hagrid's hut for some kind of protection from the weather. Hagrid himself was making a pot of tea for himself.

A soft, pitiful crooning sound came from a flock of greenish black birds as the clouds darkened and the rain fell more heavily. They sat on the white-washed fence around Hagrid's hut, crying tears of black. One lifted its vulture-like head and watched Harry curiously, wondering why this strange creature was not hiding like all the others were. He must have been a different kind of bird than the rest. He had that ancient look that the head of the Augurey birds usually had; a look which spoke of having seen more death than rain. The Augurey birds lifted their heads and cried with the sky.

“Is there a reason that we're out here getting our bloody selves drenched?” Malfoy hissed, glaring at the water that threatened to drip onto his carefully slicked-back hair. He was hiding Faith in his robes, petting her slightly stiffened fur as the kitten mewed pitifully about the rain. He had tried to leave her in the school but she had followed him all the way to the Great Hall. And, well, he couldn't just let the dratted rat drown itself! His mother would kill him for doing such a thing! He

told himself that this was the last time he would help the little rat, that it could drown itself after today.

“Pipe down Mr. Malfoy.” Professor Grubby-Plank grumbled, obviously uncomfortable with the weather as well. “We are here to observe the birds and we don’t know how long they will remain. They might leave at any moment. Can anyone tell me why this particular bird would travel with the rain? First and foremost can anyone tell me what kind of bird this is?”

Hermione’s hand shot up in an instant and she went on her tip-toes to make sure Professor Grubby-Plank saw her. She answered the moment she was picked.

“Those are the Augurey birds, also known as the Irish Phoenix. They are famous for crying a sorrowful song that was once believed to foretell death but in recent years has proven only to foretell weather. They travel in heavy rain because they are weather birds.” For once, Professor Grubby-Plank seemed dissatisfied with Hermione’s answer.

“Ms. Granger, the part about traveling with the rain was not meant to be defined from a book. It is an opinion question.” Hermione turned red at the idea of disappointing a professor. She shifted nervously and tried raising her hand again but Grubby-Plank was staring at Harry, the only student out in the rain, staring at the Augurey. He looked like some tortured poet trying to define the rain through feeling it. Grubby-Plank could just envision him returning to a writing desk still soaked, lifting a red quill and writing his discoveries as quickly as he could, trying to remember the feeling of the rain against his tortured flesh. She snapped out of her daze after a moment of staring.

“Mr. Potter, can you guess why the Augurey would travel through the heavy rain?” Harry took a moment to glance at her, as if the motion was foreign to him and he had thought he was alone. He did, however, speak.

“A long time ago, the rain brought with it the plagues and many other sicknesses, one of which was the most devastating pandemic

of Europe. The Black Death, yes, traveled through the fleas on rats, but the rats moved according to the weather just as birds travel with the changing of the seasons. The rain determined how far the rats traveled and how many people they killed. The Augurey would travel through the rain to warn those wizards up ahead of them that disease-ridden water and creatures were approaching. That is why the Augurey truly did foretell death and are not merely weather birds. It's only now of course that they are not needed. We have enough protection from infections and such to think of them as good forecasters instead of what they were originally meant for."

The class fell silent and all turned to stare at the Augurey. The birds stared back at them with the same curious expressions on their faces. Finally, one bird let out a heart-wrenching sob and took flight, closely followed by the rest of the flock. They didn't look back.

"Ten points to Gryffindor," Professor Grubby-Plank whispered. Harry turned to her as if only just being aware of her presence. She grinned at him and said, "if only for having a poet's soul and a philosopher's brain." Hermione exchanged glances with Ron before both went to grab their bags. "Class dismissed." Professor Grubby-Plank barked, hurrying into the lessening rain. Harry stood where he was for a moment before going towards the castle. Ron and Hermione grabbed him by either arm and dragged him away from the drenched class and into the nearest semi-empty corridor inside of the cold Hogwarts.

"What were you THINKING?" Hermione hissed, attempting to dry her hair without making it frizzier than it already was. "Ten points to Gryffindor for having a poet's soul?"

"You're just jealous Hermione." Harry said calmly, ignoring them as he started towards his next class, History of Magic. Binns wouldn't be too happy about having his students wet and dripping on the floor, not to mention shivering. As a ghost, he couldn't feel heat or cold so he wouldn't understand their reaction and would probably give them more homework just to spite them. He wasn't always obvious about his temper as other professors were, but he had one.

“Mr. Potter, wait a moment.” Professor McGonagall said from behind them, walking gravely, almost dragging her feet. Harry turned to her, feeling the first holds of déjà vu. How many times had she approached him in such a way to tell him something mind-blowing and often disheartening? She took him by the arm and led him towards her office, her face stern but still strained with some burden.

When he entered the room, he noticed a rather official-looking letter with the Ministry’s seal on the front and three moving photographs clipped to the page with a paperclip. It was out-of-place since he didn’t often see a Muggle creation like a paperclip within the walls of Hogwarts. Before he could make out who the photographs were taken of or why a paperclip would be with a Ministry letter, McGonagall had steered him to a stiff-backed armchair and went to sit behind her desk.

“Now Potter, this is going to come as quite a shock so I’m warning you to prepare yourself.” She said, staring directly into his eyes. “Now, if you wish to invite your mother to come stay with you so that she may be safe, Dumbledore and the Minister of Magic have agreed to find a secure lodging for her in Hogsmeade and you may go visit her to make sure she is safe for the rest of the year, though you must be accompanied either by an Auror or a teacher. After the school year, if they are not caught, you will be placed into protective custody and guarded by several Aurors in a secure location.”

“Excuse me Professor, but what are you talking about?” Harry cut in quickly when he realized she was skirting the point. She shifted, appearing to become uncomfortable by his forwardness. Well, it couldn’t be helped. The boy had a right to know what was going on.

“I will be frank with you Mr. Potter. Lily Potter, James Potter and Sirius Black have managed to escape from Azkaban and the Aurors have found definite evidence that they are coming to Hogwarts. They would only come here for you.” She waited a moment to allow him to absorb this. Fingering the letter from the Ministry, she went so far as to show him the three photographs. The first of Sirius, Harry recognized. The others... he had only seen smiling and in photographs. McGonagall waited, expecting screams of terror,

cowering, sobbing, angry denials or perhaps even begging for his life. She did not, however, expect him to stare at her with a blank expression on his face.

“I beg your pardon?” Harry whispered, clearing his throat and licking his suddenly dry lips. No, he couldn’t have heard right. The rain must have given him a cold or clogged up his ears or... something.

“Lily Potter, James Potter and Sirius Black have escaped from Azkaban prison and are on their way here as we speak.” McGonagall said slowly and clearly. Harry was pale, too pale to be normal. She stood when she realized that he might be preparing to faint. That or he was going to throw up. “Harry, do you need to go to the Hospital Wing?”

“They’ve... escaped from Azkaban?” He whispered, ignoring her. He felt emotions seize his heart: sorrow, anger, guilt, ecstasy, hope, cynicism, denial, desperation. His parents and Sirius were alive. Well, why wouldn’t they be? But why were they in Azkaban in the first place? What happened? Why didn’t Ron and Hermione tell him? Was that why he was living with Peter’s mother? His mind was going to explode... he knew these facts but somehow it had never really struck him. His parents were alive and Sirius was alive and the three were together. So close and yet so far away.

“Mr. Potter, are you alright?” McGonagall felt annoyed with herself for speaking as she had. Of COURSE the boy would be shocked to the point of incomprehension! She had said it as if she was speaking of the weather! She just wasn’t the kind of person who should have been asked to tell the boy such a thing. Dumbledore should have told him but he was so busy with the Order and trying to keep He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named under control that he simply couldn’t tell the boy something this grave in person. And a letter would have been ridiculous.

“I think... I need some air.” Harry whispered, stumbling to his feet. Before McGonagall could stop him he was out the door and hurrying to the Quidditch field. He didn’t know why his feet were taking him there but he didn’t question them. He couldn’t question anything

really. He just felt... numb. He had wasted so much time learning about Runes and trying to be “normal” that now... Sirius and his parents were alive and coming to Hogwarts? He should have tried to see THEM in Azkaban!

He stopped in front of one of the elevated stands, feeling the wind and rain pour harder onto his aching head. What was he going to do now? They could get caught, they might get Kissed before he even got a chance to speak with them. His parents, he could speak to his REAL parents and they wouldn't vanish like the echo of Voldemort's spell or in a horrible illusion created by the dementors. He could speak to his parents for the first time in his whole life and yet he couldn't think of a single thing to say to them.

“Hey mum, dad, how was prison? Did you miss me? Do you love me? Want to play Quidditch? How did it feel to die? Did you watch over me when you were dead? Did you see Sirius?” His universe and this one melted into each other, muddling his thoughts. A gentle hand touched his shoulder.

He spun around, wand at the ready but he stopped when he saw who it was.

“Harry, are you alright?” It was Ginny. Ginny Weasley, the youngest of all the Weasleys and the nicest, most level-headed one of all; she was also the one with the sharpest temper. He felt the anger taking over. He didn't want to see anyone smiling. He wanted everyone to feel his pain for once. “You shouldn't be out here in the rain you know. My brother would kill you if he knew you were out here. He's taken a real liking to you.”

“Why are you out here then? He'd kill you too.” He snapped back, feeling himself bristle at the implications of her words. He could take care of himself! He didn't need anyone babying him! Ginny giggled sheepishly and held up an old and crooked Comet Two-Sixty.

“I knicked it from the old Slytherin broom closet. This one used to be Malfoy's.” She seemed especially proud of herself. Harry felt the anger draining out of him at her wet smile, her hair plastered to her

face and the back of her neck. He knew they both probably looked like drowned rats but at that moment, he didn't really care.

"Are you on the team?" Ginny stared at him as if he were crazy then laughed.

"Ron rigged it so that I couldn't be on the team. He said that he would get too distracted knowing that I could get hit with a couple of Bludgers." She shifted the broom to her other hand. "So, why are you out here? I've already given you a reason." She lifted the stolen broom as evidence.

"I... needed to think." Harry said truthfully. Ginny smiled and shrugged.

"Sometimes thinking is over-rated. You think and you think but all you do is confuse your thoughts and make it harder to sort them out. That's why I love flying; it helps me NOT to think for a little while. Everything becomes clear after that." She held out the broom for him to take. "We can take turns if you want."

He wanted to say no. He knew it could blow his cover to fly, much as he wanted to. He knew that flying was one thing he couldn't fake. But Ginny was smiling in such a care-free way... it reminded him of when he had been in first year and when he flew for the first time. Without really stopping to consider what could happen, Harry took the broom and straddled it, kicking off into the air. The mud squeelched under his feet but then it was gone, down down, up up, the sky became the ground and everything stopped, even time. The wind in his face, the rain in his hair, the ground far below; Harry was free.

For the first time in years, he didn't have to think about anything but Ginny cheering him on from the ground and the Augurey birds who watched him from the Forbidden Forest. Ginny just smiled, feeling somehow lighter. Harry had looked so pained... but now he was almost dangerous with his flying. She had never felt so right helping someone before. She wondered if he would mind letting her help him more often...

Chapter Nineteen: Quinton Evans

After Harry's refreshing flight, he and Ginny laughed and joked as they returned the drenched broom to its shed and walked back to Hogwarts. The invisible sun was just setting when they entered the Great Hall, still attempting to dry their cloths. Ron and Hermione looked confused when they saw Harry SMILING. It wasn't even a smile but more like a lopsided grin.

Ginny was chattering like an excited child, ignoring Colin's grumbles when she stepped into a shot he was taking of Neville. Harry instinctively raised his hand to block the light of the flash. He hated taking pictures.

Beside Colin were Susan Bones and Luna Lovegood, both leafing through the photographs Colin had taken for them. Luna took one photograph from the pile and held it out to Colin.

"Why is Nearly Headless Nick glowing like that?" She asked curiously. Colin moved aside to get another shot of a posing Neville.

"Ghosts always glow like that in photographs. I found out when I got one of Professor Binns and went to Professor Flitwick to ask him if I used the wrong charm to develop them." He sucked in a deep breathe. "Anyway, I can show you the other ones I've taken of the Bloody Baron and even Peeves! Here, I'll show you."

Harry sat down, unconsciously noting the puddle forming under him. Ginny sat across from him, grinning broadly. "My brothers sent me something from home; they nearly got caught this time. Mum told them that if they kept experimenting in her house she would box their ears. So they went to dad's garage. Mum was satisfied." She grinned wider, eyes dancing. "Want to see what it is?" She began rummaging through her soaked pockets.

"So they're still trying to make a joke shop?" Harry asked, secretly wincing when he remembered that if it had not been for the prize money of the TriWizard tournament, Fred and George would still be

experimenting as they did in this universe. This fact was somewhat depressing since Harry loved the Weasley Wizard Wheezes.

Ginny finished her search and presented a stack of chewing gum. Harry took one and examined the wrapper, which was suspiciously dry.

INVISIBLE CHEW

Amaze friends when you vanish for minutes at a time and then reappear with a dramatic pop! Warning: each stick of gum only lasts for five minutes.

Harry's eyebrows shot up. He hadn't seen THIS invention in his universe. It just roved that the Weasley twins were creative in any universe and with any resources.

"Harry, did you hear me? I said that you could have four of them." Ginny said, hugging her arms tightly to her trembling chest. It was so COLD in the Great Hall! Harry noticed that there were two used wrappers and eight pieces left over. He carefully selected them before handing back the main wrapper.

"Thanks Ginny." Harry said, tucking the gum into a separate pocket. This could serve as useful in the future. Ginny tapped her toes restlessly on the floor, looking around thoughtfully.

"So what do you think about your parents escaping Azkaban?" She finally blurted out, staring him in the eye. Harry took a moment to grow accustomed to this brash new Ginny. She rarely looked anyone in the face in the universe. This, of course, might have been attributed to the fact that she had had a paralyzing crush on him so he only saw her meek. She had only last year started showing her true colors.

"I'm kind of upset about it." Harry said truthfully. He waited for her to say something so that he could keep up the lie and pretend that he was ONLY upset.

Ginny tapped her foot restlessly.

“Oh.” She said in a slightly bored way.

Harry couldn't take it anymore.

“Mostly though, I'm more upset that no one bothered to tell me they were still alive and in Azkaban.” At his words, Ginny's face changed into one of interest.

“You mean your mum didn't tell you about them?”

“She's not my mum.” Harry growled, making sure to lower his voice. “I'm trying to figure out why Dumbledore didn't have the balls to tell me himself.” Ginny laughed, quickly covering her mouth so that no one would pay attention to them.

“McGonagall told you about them?”

“Yes, and she bumbled that up quite nicely too. Got ahead of herself. Why, if I'd been suicidal I would have thrown myself out the Divination Tower from her explanation.”

“Do you think they'll really come here to get you?” She asked excitedly, leaning closer and whispering. Neville was staring at them suspiciously.

“I actually hope they do. I don't really remember my parents. I want to at least talk to them once.”

“They were arrested for abusing you as a baby!”

“That's a fat load of lies. My parents loved me; they would never do anything to hurt me, especially when I was a baby. I don't believe it; I bet someone set them up for it. I'm not going to let anyone stop me from seeing them either, not even Ron or Hermione.” At this he turned to glare at his friends, both of who immediately whipped back around in their seats trying not to appear guilty of eavesdropping.

“But Harry, they’re dangerous people. They’ve killed before!” Ginny didn’t seem at all traumatized or upset by what she was saying. On the contrary, she appeared to be enjoying herself immensely with the way the conversation was going.

“A lot of people are dangerous and they’re still walking about now aren’t they? I don’t think my parents were Death Eaters. I think that my godfather was even LESS likely to be one.” Harry was trying to stop himself from blurting all of his opinions out so fast, but it had been so long that he’d kept quiet. He didn’t WANT to pretend to fear his own parents and Sirius. He didn’t WANT to keep quiet anymore. Ron and Hermione used to listen to him rant when he was overloaded with loaded questions and just general confusion. Now... even they wouldn’t listen. Here, MALFOY was more likely to listen to his problems than Ron and Hermione were. He couldn’t stop himself now.

“We would have to sneak off the grounds to see them.” Ginny said suggestively.

“We? Ginny, there can’t be a ‘we’. I don’t want to get you into any kind of trouble.” He DID manage to bite his tongue before he mentioned anything from his own world. He managed not to say anything about getting people in trouble to save his own life, without being aware of the consequences at the time.

“Oh don’t be such a prude Harry.” Ginny said, sitting back somewhat angrily. “You can’t guard me like Ron does. I hate when my parents and my brothers try to protect me and fawn over me. “Oh poor Ginny, I’m SURE she’s about to cry just because she pricked her finger” “Oh she can’t play Quidditch, she might get hit with a Bludger and die” “She couldn’t possibly have done anything wrong, Ginny is an angel”. I’m not going to let YOU baby me too. If I want to go with you to see your parents then I will!”

“I’m not even sure I’ll be ABLE to.” Harry said quickly, his own temper rising. It was a lie of course. He was going to do everything in his power, including cheat and lie, to see them at least once.

“Well, I can help you! I want to and you can’t stop me!”

“Ginny, I don’t want you to get into trouble!”

The doors of the Great Hall slammed open. Every head in the Great Hall turned to stare at the small group of Aurors that entered the school and stood guard over the entrance as three men strode towards the head table. Minister Fudge was in the lead though he was the shortest of them. To his right was Kingsley, an Auror that Harry recognized on sight; to Fudge’s left was an Auror that Harry wasn’t so familiar with. He was tall, fierce and wore a strange dark red cloak instead of the traditional black robes of the Aurors. He had a silver wolf embroidered on the backs of his gloves.

“Minister, might I ask what you are doing here?” Dumbledore asked pleasantly. He was staring at the strange Auror flanking Fudge.

“Three prisoners have escaped from Azkaban, Dumbledore. Certain precautions must be put into effect if we’re to protect your students.” Fudge said calmly. He motioned to the strange man beside him. “This is Quinton Evans: top Auror of his year, Order of Merlin First Class, Skilled Potion’s Master, Dragon-Handler, and –,”

“Minister please, I don’t need so much introduction.” Quinton said, seeming almost annoyed by the flattering words. He brushed aside his light brown hair to look at the rest of the students, setting his blue eyes on Harry for a moment before continuing his analysis. Neville perked up, flashing his most charming smile. Even Malfoy straightened his hair nervously as his eyes roamed towards the Slytherin house.

“It is an honor to have Mr. Evans here... though if I may ask... what is he DOING here exactly?” Dumbledore smiled the entire time speaking, but there was just the slightest strain at the edge of his wrinkled eyes.

“He’s here as Mr. Potter’s personal bodyguard. With three Death Eaters after him, we needed the best.”

Harry and Ginny slowly turned to look at each other, Ginny's awed and Harry's astounded. A bodyguard? That was the LAST thing he needed.

Chapter Twenty: The Calm Before the Storm

Harry hurried into the Gryffindor tower, panting slightly after his haste to get to a somewhat secure place to talk in private. He turned back to the backside of the Fat Lady portrait as Ron and Hermione hurried in after Ginny, who was behind him, looking worried and slightly confused.

“Harry, what are we going to do?!” Hermione cried, grabbing onto the front of Harry’s robes and unleashing a water fountain into his chest. Harry’s eyes widened uncomfortably but he hugged her, if only because she was crying. Ginny stared at her but said nothing. “Harry, he’ll know! He has a FILE on you; there are files! The Ministry has files on everyone, EVERYONE! He’s going to know and he’s going to make you tell him and then we’ll all be sent to Azkaban!”

“Hermione, please calm down; if he comes in here and sees you babbling like this then he’ll certainly know.” Harry said, speaking with more calm than he felt. His mind was whirling, making him dizzy. There was something trying to claw out of his body from his chest, forcing emotion into his throat. He knew what this was: panic. How many times had he felt this emotion? He couldn’t even remember.

“Harry, they’re going to send us to Azkaban! Don’t you know what this means? We’re DEAD! We can’t survive Azkaban without going insane!” Hermione shrieked. Ginny stepped out from behind Harry and slapped Hermione. This snapped the hysterical girl back into an illusion of sanity.

“First of all, stop screaming. Second of all, what’s going on? Why are you going to Azkaban? Fred and George have more of a reason to go there than you ever could. What exactly did you do?” Ginny demanded as she put her hands on her hips in much the same way that Mrs. Weasley did when she was upset and stubborn enough to wait for someone to tell her what was going on. Ron recognized this attitude and resisted it as he always did when he knew that if he opened his mouth, his mother would box his ears.

“Ginny, I’m sorry but would you please excuse us? We have to speak in private.” Harry said before Ron could speak. He grabbed Hermione and Ron by their elbows and walked quickly towards the boy’s dormitory. Ginny began to protest but the door was slammed in her face before she could say anything. She tried listening at the door but Harry placed a Silencing Charm on the door before turning to face the problem.

Ron began to pace once he recognized the soothing contents of his room. His bed, the earthy burgundy and the faded gold of the bed sheets, the frost- covered windows all gave him enough mental strength to attempt thinking about the situation. Hermione sat on Harry’s bed and began to bite her nails, tears still falling from her eyes though she wasn’t crying anymore. Harry relaxed against the door and stared at them thoughtfully. He struggled before finally coming to a decision. The three of them WERE in this together and the Ron and Hermione of his home, his real friends, HAD to be in the Ron and Hermione of this universe, somewhere; he would have to brainstorm with them if they were to stay out of Azkaban long enough for Harry to find a way back to his own universe.

“Okay... let’s think of this calmly and rationally.” Harry said, moving to sit beside Hermione. “I’ve been having trouble acting like... well, like Neville really.”

“Neville?” Ron looked up from his pacing, confusion written all over his face. “What do you mean you’re acting like Neville? He doesn’t act like the... well, the other Harry does.”

“The Neville of my universe acts just like the Harry of this universe does,” Harry admitted, watching both of Ron and Hermione gawk at him, “though he’s much kinder than your Harry was. Look, that’s not important right now. We have other, more urgent things to worry about, more specifically the Auror that’s going to become my bodyguard. What are we going to do about him?”

“What CAN we do about him?” Hermione asked, already looking calmer than she had when she first heard the news about Harry’s surprising new bodyguard. “It’s obvious that he should be able to

catch any minor jinxes or spells we could do on him since, you know, he must be highly trained in the art of spells and enchantments.”

“We’ll have to find a way around him.” Ron said. “There HAS to be a way. Yeah, having a bodyguard, especially having three murderers after you, sounds appealing but we have to think about the dangers of being discovered. I mean, if You-Know-Who knew what was going on... things could get REALLY messy.”

Harry felt himself bristle, clenching his fists at his sides. “My parents and Sirius are NOT murderers. Sirius was framed for murder in my third year; he was innocent. And I know for a FACT that my parents would NEVER hurt me. NEVER.” Hermione and Ron glanced at each other before shrugging uncomfortably.

“It doesn’t change the fact that they’re coming here Harry.” Hermione said as gently as she could. “And even if they ARE innocent, the Ministry is completely convinced of the opposite. They’re not going to keep from punishing them just because you said that they were innocent. They would just think that you had been jinxed or cursed. That or someone had paid you to speak in their defense, and since the Ministry DOES think that they’re murderers, the only people who would pay you to save them would be Death Eaters.”

“By the way Harry, have you figured out what you’re going to DO exactly? After all, your parents are coming here. I’m sure it would be interesting to talk to them. They’re probably different from your parents in your own universe.” Ron said. Harry turned his head and snorted disgruntled.

“Of course they’re different. My parents are dead for one. For two, I’ve never met them. Anyway, I want to meet them. And I don’t care if Evans IS a bodyguard and an Auror, I’m not going to let him stop me from the one thing I’ve wanted more than anything in my entire life.”

“So Quinton, the Ministry decided to send YOU to baby sit Potter? What did you do this time to piss them off?” Severus asked as he passed by the tired- looking Auror. Both men were seated in

Severus's private chambers, sharing a bottle of brandy. Quinton had removed his cloak and gloves, revealing a light silver fur on the backs of his hands and a strange gold ring embedded with blood red stones.

"Oh it was a little thing really! I just let the Death Eaters into the Department of Mysteries after the Minister announced to the press that the Ministry building could not be breached by anyone. The fool needed to get kicked off his high horse." Quinton said, sipping his brandy before glancing at Severus. "And you? Why does the Dark Lord have you here baby sitting the Longbottom boy? From the stories I've been told, he couldn't hit the backside of a dragon if it were asleep and obese."

"You know very well that I work both sides same as you."

"Of course of course," Quinton said, fixing him with a lopsided grin. "Though you know me... if I had to be locked in a room full of screaming, big-headed children, I would sooner use them for werewolf bait than teach them anything."

"Well, it took me a long time but you get used to the buggers after a while. Anyway, let's talk seriously for a bit. I have some... interesting information that I don't want either the Dark Lord or Dumbledore to have, mostly because I don't think the knowledge will keep any sort of balance."

"Oh, you have a secret? Let's hear it; I can't stay here all day you know. I have to find that Potter brat." Quinton said, serving himself a generous amount of brandy. Severus knew of course that Quinton was lying. He couldn't stand being kept out of a secret. "Does it have to do with Longbottom or perhaps a traitor to one of the sides?"

"Actually, it has to do with your charge: Potter; turns out that he's more of a wild card than we gave him credit for. Ever since the beginning of the year, he's been acting... shall we say odd? At one point I had to rush him to the Hospital Wing when he almost cursed me. He was verbally defending not only his parents but Sirius Black as well. He spoke as if he KNEW them... and here, I have his grades for the last semester." Severus went to his desk, rummaging for a

moment before returning with a sheet of parchment. He dropped it into Quinton's lap before taking another sip of his brandy.

Quinton whistled when he saw the notes, looking over them appraisingly. "He's gone from bad to... well, mastery level. And he started acting strangely around this time?" Severus nodded slowly. "Interesting... especially since this is much earlier than his parents' and Black's escapes from Azkaban so there is no way for them to be blamed or rather accused of changing him. There was no mention of the Potters at the Master's last meeting or any recent meeting for that matter. Has the Order even discussed the boy's situation?"

"Not really, which is why I'm telling you about my discoveries. Dumbledore is far too busy with the Minister and the Order to really look after anyone but Longbottom. He normally would see such an interesting development if Potter wasn't so damned good at being invisible. He's gotten quieter, spending most of his time in the library researching Ancient Runes and Herbology instead of lazing around as he usually did. He hasn't gotten into as many fights with Draco anymore, mostly because Potter has gotten slightly violent. He's been known to start a fist fight if Draco mentions Potter's parents in any derogatory way when the Potter I knew would have sooner called his OWN mother a bitch than say anything rude to Draco."

"I see." Quinton mused, staring at the fireplace thoughtfully. "I'll watch him more closely for any signs of another Barty Crouch incident. For now though we'll keep quiet about this to the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. They would certainly want to know about this, though we can't shift the balance by just telling one or both. You remember when the Dark Lord decided that the Potters were too much of a risk to stay alive." There was an undertone of anger in his voice.

"Did you see Lily when she left the prison?" Severus asked quietly. He knew that the subject was a tender one, what with Quinton having become such good friends with Harry's mother. Quinton became ridged, straightening his back and clenching his jaw.

“She couldn’t come to see me in person though she left a message for me in the pub where we used to meet before the war. You know, the Rabbit’s Tail in Bristol? I missed her because I was in China exterminating some demons from the local shrines. The idiot monks opened the seals to “see what was inside” though the enchantments stated with perfect clarity that to open the bloody boxes meant to release demons.”

“Quinton, you’re still not telling me what she said.” Severus cut him off, looking at him thoughtfully. He knew of course that Quinton was avoiding the topic of Lily. He always had, for as long as Severus could remember knowing him.

“It simply said that she was alright and not to believe that she was guilty of the charges posed against her.” Quinton said, shifting in his seat. “My goodness, look at the time. I really must be going Severus. We’ll speak more tomorrow when the little tart babies have gone to slumber land.” With that he stood and hurried out of Severus’s chambers.

Severus sighed inwardly and went to his desk, staring at the official Ministry letter warning him of the Potters and Black coming towards Hogwarts. It was standard procedure: all of the teachers received such a letter, just as when James Potter almost escaped from Azkaban years before. The residents of Hogsmeade also received letters like this one to warn them of a possible danger to their lives. They had the typical warnings: don’t go out after dark, keep the children indoors, lock away the dangerous potions with Ministry approved enchantments, etc. Severus still remembered the last letter from when James had nearly escaped. Severus had an excellent memory; he needed such a memory for his potions work.

He could still remember when he was a young hormonal teenager, sixteen, and receiving the Dark Mark. He remembered how it burned deeper than flesh, deeper than bone, tainting his soul. He remembered returning to the Slytherin common room and taking a long, cold shower, scrubbing and scrubbing at the Mark. He felt unclean after the burning had stopped and his screams quieted. He remembered the first time that James Potter attacked him. He

remembered the first Potions class he ever taught. He remembered the first mission he had ever gone on, both for Dumbledore and for the Dark Master. He remembered how his parents died and the first time anyone had ever been kind to him. He remembered when Quinton wasn't named Quinton at all, or even Evans. He remembered what Quinton was like in school, as a Slytherin, as a friend, and as a fighter.

Severus shook his head and drained his glass to clear his thoughts. So many memories... he hoped Harry Potter wouldn't make Quinton react in the same way James Potter had.

Chapter Twenty One: The Other Side of the Looking Glass

Harry looked back then grunted, turning to his book again. Evans was still there, looking extremely bored, in Harry's Herbology class. Trelawney had been harassing the Auror earlier to do some demonstrations with her but when Evans clearly stated that one spell from him would likely kill the eccentric professor, Trelawney backed off smoothly and went for Ron instead. He kept twitching whenever he did the spell; he wasn't nearly as good at hiding his feelings as Harry was.

Neville though, he was almost comical, he shook so much whenever Evans glanced at him. He had broken three scrying dishes and cracked a crystal ball so far as he blundered around the room, attempting to do the Seeing spell over his own eyes without jabbing himself in the eye (as Seamus had already demonstrated so skillfully not to do). After class, Evans left Harry's side for only five minutes to speak to Neville in private before returning to Harry's back, watching him as he walked towards his Charms class. Picking out a seat in the back, Harry only barely kept the annoyance from showing on his face when he felt rather than saw Evans sitting behind him.

Flitwick glanced at Harry and Evans before nodding to himself, straightening a bit. "Today class, we shall be learning decoding charms. These charms were first used to decode the messages sent by the enemy during the first World War and were later used to help decode such artifacts as the Rosetta Stone and the ancient hieroglyphics on the Invisible Pyramid and the underground temple of Anubis. Now, get out your wands please and face this wall." Flitwick drew a cord just above his podium of books, revealing the wall to their left, covered in various languages and symbols, all seemingly unreadable.

Harry stood and went to a strip of the wall which had some Arabic writing and stared at it. No matter how he stared, however, he couldn't tell if the writing was coded or if it was simply Arabic and he couldn't read it. He touched the letters gently, tracing their delicate lines and simple dots. The writing was beautiful.

Flitwick was saying something... but he couldn't hear it. His mind was growing distant... a sudden piercing pain went through his scar but Harry didn't move, simply kept his eyes wide open to see what would come. The pain, he was accustomed to it after so many years of living through Voldemort's temper tantrums. This was like being welcomed by a stinging blanket that he had worn since he could remember.

The world slowly clouded over with fog, ever so slow. His visions were usually so sudden and gripping, but this one was... almost building tension around him. The stone walls turned to a soft wood, mahogany perhaps. There were no windows in this strange place, but this unfortunate fact was resolved by the hundreds of candles all around on the walls and hanging in the air. The desks vanished to reveal chairs, many chairs, all sorts of chairs. There was a red armchair with little gold specks, another blue chair with claws for armrests, a high-backed chair with a black cushioned seat, a yellow and green futon, and many others. All around were people he knew from his life, some vaguely familiar and some his dearest friends.

There was Kingsley, the Auror who had been after Sirius but had turned out to be part of the Order of the Phoenix, and there was Tonks, Remus, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Hermione, all of the Weasleys save for Percy, Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, Flitwick (not the one from the class that Harry couldn't see anymore), Minister Fudge, a woman that Harry recognized as Neville's grandmother, and Evans of all people. He was sitting back in his chair, looking much older than he looked in the universe Harry was currently in. His temples were marred with some silver hairs and his cloths were more rumpled and dirty. The silver wolf embroidery on his gloves were more faded and the threads were cut and sticking up oddly. The blood looked perfectly normal on his shoulder, adding to the conclusion that he must have been in some kind of fight.

More shocking still was the fact that his Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon and even Dudley were present, albeit uncomfortable-looking since they flinched every time one of their companions moved. Evans and Snape were sitting right next to each other, plainly glaring at Petunia and Vernon, which of course made the two Muggles extremely nervous. Dudley was sitting on his hands, crying quite obviously at

being forced to sit with so many people that could and probably would turn him into a pig. It might even have been planned that Hagrid and Madame Maxime were sitting behind him.

“Quinton...” Dumbledore suddenly said, his eyes narrowing, “the portal is opening. Can you sense Harry’s magic?”

At this, Evans stood up, knocking his chair over. “Sense him? I can bloody see him!” He pointed to Harry, exactly where he was. Harry stared back at him incredulously. What was happening? He didn’t understand. There were so many people all there, all turning to stare at where he was standing. Only Voldemort could see him in the visions, and even then it took him a long time to sense his presence. But all of them, all of them could see him! That meant... he had to actually be there.

“HARRY!” Ron and Hermione screamed, rushing to stand. Both tackled him simultaneously. Harry made a strange oof-ing sound as they crashed into him. They were real! What was going on?

“Harry we were so worried about you! Where did you go? Are you alright? No one hurt you did they?” Hermione demanded, fussing over him. There was true worry in her eyes, tears streaming down her face as she patted him to make sure he was real. Ron was sniffing but grinning broadly. He clapped a hand over Harry’s back, almost hard enough to knock his glasses right off his nose.

“Ron, not so hard.” Hermione said sharply but Harry was grinning back at him.

"It's great to see you guys too." He said.

“Dumbledore, why are Harry’s eyes glazed silver like that?” Mr. Weasley whispered to Dumbledore with a terrified look on his face. “He’s not... dead is he?”

“I’m not dead.” Harry said bluntly. “I’m just... stuck. I was sent to another universe, everything is different.” Everyone collectively gasped and turned to their neighbor to discuss this. “Ron and

Hermione of that universe did a spell, some kind of summoning spell, and somehow summoned me there by accident. Now I have to pretend to be the Harry here because they're too scared of being sent to Azkaban for doing an illegal spell and because the Harry there died."

Hermione paled and stared at Harry with her heart on her sleeve. "Oh Merlin, Harry, I'm so sorry! It was my fault wasn't it? Ron would have never found a book like that, with a spell that was illegal. I talked him into it didn't I? I put you in this horrible place! I'm so sorry!" She hugged him tightly, squeezing his ribs until he thought he might burst from her surprising strength.

"H-Hermione! S-Stop, its o-okay!" He managed to choke. Hermione dropped him, blushing embarrassedly at having hugged him in front of the professors and the others. "Hermione, you didn't do this. Your twin here did it, and she's not completely like you so why would I blame you? Its okay, you didn't do this to me. She did." He rubbed his stomach where she had crushed him. "I'm trapped here though, and I don't know how to get back. The Ron and Hermione there said that they would help me get out of here but they haven't even tried to research a way out for me. More, they've tried to forget it even happened."

"What a horrible thing to do!" Mrs. Weasley screeched, standing like a big mother hen and going to fuss over him. Harry blushed brightly and half glanced at Snape, who was sneering back at him, but in a surprisingly soft way. He too seemed strangely worried. "I taught Ronald better than this!"

"M-Mrs. Weasley, for the last time! That's not the Ron we know there, he's very much different than he is here. Neville is the Boy-Who-Lived there, and Ron is trying to be friends with him for his fame." Ron turned pale at these words.

"I would never do that Harry!" He said, sounding hurt.

"Ron, I know you would never do that." Harry said impatiently. "I've told you, all the people there are different." Suddenly Harry turned to

look at Dumbledore. "My parents are alive there, they escaped Azkaban during Christmas with Sirius. They're all alive!" The room went stone cold silent at his excited words but Harry barreled on. "And because they've escaped, Fudge told Evans to look after me so that they couldn't come after me since they're supposedly coming to kill me." Evans perked up at these words.

"He did?" He said simply, looking curious.

"Yes, he did." The world began to fog over again. Harry tried to grab Ron but his hand went right through him. "Quickly, I'm going back! Look in the restricted section, the book is supposed to be illegal! Try to get me back!" Dumbledore stared at him calmly, his eyes aglow as he watched Harry vanishing.

"Harry, be careful. Voldemort now knows where you are and he's coming for you. We think he might have found a secret portal into the universe you're in." Harry's eyes widened as he struggled to stay in his own universe, his own home.

"What?! Why the bloody hell didn't you tell me that when I first got-," He completely vanished... right into the middle of the Gryffindor Common Room. When saying the middle of the Common Room, this also includes altitude. Harry was fifteen feet above the ground.

He came crashing down and smashed into a coffee table and his bounced sickeningly on the stone floor. He lay there for a long time, trembling and aching. He tried to lift his head but found that it was too heavy to lift. He closed his eyes and took in deep breaths as he tried to calm his racing heart. He had thought he would just appear back in Flitwick's room, but how and why he had appeared where he had was a complete mystery to him.

Ten minutes later Evans came dashing into the room with Professor Flitwick and Professor Snape, all three staring at him.

"What happened?" Evans asked calmly though he looked disheveled as he had in his previous universe, though there was no blood this time. "You vanished. Did you see something?" Harry

weakly sat him, shaking off Flitwick when the little professor attempted to help him.

“I don’t remember what happened. All I remember is falling from the air.” He said though secretly he was mulling over the information he had gathered back in his universe. Why were his Aunt and Uncle in Hogwarts? If that was Hogwarts? Why was Evans called in his own universe? What was he going to do about Voldemort knowing where he was and wanting to come after him? Was that perhaps why his scar had reacted earlier? Was that the exact moment that Voldemort had come into this universe?

He put his hand to his scar and his hand trembled when the scar was hot, searing with heat really... quite painful but not so much so as Harry was accustomed. So Voldemort had come after all.

Snape stared at Harry’s hand as it went to his forehead and brushed the hair of his bangs away to touch the scar. It seemed to pulse now. The scar that had seemed innocent enough before was now... alive somehow? Evans whispered to him softly. “That thing is emitting a great deal of energy. The kind of energy in that thing is only something we’re used to feeling.” Snape frowned when he caught the reference to the Dark Lord.

“To the hospital wing with you Mr. Potter.” Flitwick said shakily. “We have to make sure you haven’t had any poisons or spells cast on you from the Potters.” He took Harry by the arm and led him towards the hospital wing. Snape and Evans exchanged glances before following closely behind them.

Chapter Twenty Two: The Secret DA Meetings: Part One

Sirius shivered in his dog form, watching the people hurrying by into their warm houses with their warm food waiting and their warm children. He waited for a while, just watching, knowing that he could have had his own family and his own warm children to go home to. The thought drifted out of his mind as quietly as it had come. He was free now, and though he was on the run he couldn't remember feeling this free since playing on the Gryffindor Quidditch team so many years ago. His lip curled into the ghost of his old grin as he thought about it. He stood just a bit taller, his shoulders rested a bit easier, his face relaxed just a bit more as he thought of better days.

He turned and hurried back to the cave at the outskirts of Hogsmeade, his nose leading him back to the hiding spot in which James and Lily were waiting for him with newspaper clippings and food. Luckily, this time Sirius had both.

When he entered the cave, it was to the sight of Lily resting her head on James's lap, sleeping quietly. She wasn't tossing and turning as she was prone to do after Azkaban. They had all been sleeping just a bit easier now that they were away from the oppressive dementors though they were by no means back to their old selves. Perhaps the fact that the three of them were together and taking care of one another leant them strength enough to relax more than they would have if they had been alone. 'At least I have someone to talk to.' Sirius told himself silently as he dropped the bag with four chicken legs and a half-eaten loaf of bread at James's feet and returned to his human form. Lily didn't stir.

"How is she?" He whispered softly to James, watching his best friend gently caress his wife's beautiful red hair. They looked so peaceful together, especially James, even skeletal-thin and unshaven. He smiled slightly at Sirius, ignoring the loud grumbling of his stomach at the smell of what was to them, a banquet.

"She's sleeping very well, almost three hours now."

“That’s great!” Sirius whispered excitedly. Lily had been having a lot of trouble sleeping since her dreams were so violent. Luckily she had James to soothe her at night. Sirius was jealous only occasionally and even then it passed more easily now that he was out of Azkaban. He knew that Lily needed the affection more than he did, what with her having to live through the dementors without being able to turn into an animal to soften their influence as James and Sirius could do.

“Have you seen any of the students?” James whispered casually, still petting his wife’s hair soothingly. She smiled a little and turned on her side, nuzzling his thigh to make herself more comfortable.

“No, I’m sorry James but it seems that the students have been forced to stay in the castle since we got out. They have no idea where we are though.” Sirius said, making himself comfortable on his rock-seat, moving to give James a chicken leg and grab one for himself. The other two would be left for Lily, who needed the food much more than the other two since she had always had a high metabolism.

“Do you think that Harry is alright?” James whispered softly, before touching his food though his mouth salivated at the sight and smell of it. Sirius smiled reassuringly.

“There’s no safer place in the world for him than Hogwarts.” He said, biting into his meal and winking at him reassuringly.

“Hope you’re right.” James said after a long pause before he too devoured his meal. During this time, Lily lay sleeping in her husband’s lap.

Harry was in the library again, researching more Ancient Runes to experiment with when he heard a soft “psst!” from his right. At first he thought it was two girls giggling to each other and trying to get his attention to annoy him. But then it became a bit louder and more annoyed, and Harry recognized the voice as male instead of female. Finally his curiosity got the better of him and he turned to find Malfoy in one of the more distant bookshelves, trying to look inconspicuous.

Harry looked back to see where Evans was, finding that his bodyguard was talking to the librarian, or rather, arguing with her about something. The normally strict woman was blushing with passion and whispering quite loudly at him, disturbing some of the students. They, of course, were unaccustomed to she herself being loud when she preached every single day to be silent in a library.

Looking around again when Malfoy kept making that strange “psst!” sound, Harry took another moment to realize that Malfoy was signaling madly for him to go to him. Again, Harry wondered at what the reason for his summons was but curiosity won out and he stood, walking casually towards Malfoy. He ducked into the bookshelf just as Malfoy did, both almost nose to nose.

“What do you want Malfoy? I’m studying.” Harry said, not sounding quite as annoyed as he felt. Malfoy narrowed his eyes.

“That’s just is Potter, you don’t study. You’ve been acting really weird lately. I want to know what’s going on with you, and don’t you say I’m making something out of nothing because I know something is going on and I don’t want to be left out of it.”

“Well, do you want to discuss my private life in such a public place or are you just trying to annoy me?” Harry demanded, emerald eyes smoldering in his face. Malfoy stared into his eyes for a long moment before he whispered seriously.

“I want to be a part of whatever you’re doing.”

Harry stared at him for a long time before slowly sitting back on his heels, getting a thoughtful look. Was Malfoy just putting him on? Or did he perhaps think that Harry was now some part of a group of a growing power? That had to be it. He wanted a piece of the pie that he thought Harry had joined.

Harry was about to tell Malfoy to go fuck himself when he again thought to himself. He had been considering starting up the DA again but he had no idea of how he would gather his students again and, for that matter, how he was going to keep them all quiet without the

help of the Weasley twins since they had been the ones to use that nifty spell to keep all those that betrayed the DA private. Then again, he did know the spell so he could do it himself. And if he wasn't strong enough, he could always ask Ginny.

That was it! He would teach Ginny and Malfoy! Maybe this way, he could earn Malfoy's help and his loyalty. True, he was an annoying brat but he was also useful, had many connections, and it really wouldn't hurt him to have Malfoy as an ally, especially since he had ties to Voldemort himself. And if his universe's Voldemort, as Harry knew him to be, Malfoy could become an indispensable asset.

"After dinner, meet me on the third floor corridor next to the room that was off limits in first year. Bring your worst pair of robes and your wand. Leave your cronies in their dorms." He whispered. Malfoy blinked at him, surprised that he had inadvertently said yes so quickly.

"You make it sound like we're going to shag." He said, distrustfully. Harry glanced at him and chuckled, grinning at him in a sassy way.

"I don't mean to break your heart Malfoy, but you're not as irresistible as you seem to think you are." He stood upright before Malfoy could come up with a witty retort and walked back to his table. Evans was still arguing with the librarian when he got back so he resumed his studying, grinning slightly to himself.

Malfoy had been a lot easier than he thought he would be; now the trick was getting Ginny to come too without making her suspect anything or finding out that Malfoy was going too.

Harry found Ginny in the Common Room by the fire, reading from her Charms book. In the back of his mind Harry recalled that Ginny had always loved Charms and was quite good at it. She was very studious in his universe, though she it didn't invade her life as it seems to have in this one. Harry attributed it to everyone thinking that she had been the one to petrify so many people in her first year at Hogwarts. He suspected some still thought her guilty of the crimes she didn't really commit.

“Ginny, hey, I’m glad I caught you before dinner.” Harry said, coming to sit across from her. Ginny looked up and grinned at him when she recognized him. She closed her book and tilted her head slightly.

“Hey, I heard you vanished during your Charms class. What happened?” Harry blinked at her for a moment before grinning.

“Actually, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. It has to be in secret though, I don’t want anyone to know what’s been going on with me. It’s really private actually and I was wondering if you would meet me in the third floor corridor by the painting of the cat sleeping in the wicker chair.”

Ginny laughed and leaned forward interestedly, eyes dancing.

“You make it sound like we’re going to shag.” She said. Harry’s mouth dropped and he threw his pillow at her. She laughed and lifted her arms defensively to hide her face.

“What is it with you people and shagging? I’m not going to shag you! I just want to talk!” This caught several people’s attention, including Ron, who’s ears seemed to perk up as if he were some kind of radio programmed to pick up certain words, specifically “shag” and “sister”. He glared when he noticed it was Harry and stood up but was pushed back down by Hermione, who shook her head. They began to argue quite loudly but Harry and Ginny ignored them.

“So we’ll meet after dinner?” She said, more seriously this time though her eyes were dancing wickedly.

“Yes. Make sure to bring your dirtiest pair of robes and your wand. Make sure that no one follows you, this is going to have to be kept a secret alright?”

Ginny nodded and grinned slightly, rubbing her hands together. “I can’t wait to find out what’s finally going on! No one ever tells me anything and now I get to know a secret that no one else will.” Harry chuckled to himself, though it pleased him that Ginny was so happy

to be let into something as easy as a secret. He had been forced into several of those against his will, much too many for his own taste.

“Just don’t forget to bring your wand, that’s important. Don’t ask now what it’ll be for but trust me, you’re going to understand why you’re going to need it once I explain it all to you.”

Now the only problem was getting away from Evans, Harry thought to himself.

Chapter Twenty Three: The DA Proposal

Harry stood by the Great Hall door after dinner, waiting patiently for Malfoy and Ginny to come to him. He had gone over what he would say in his head, wondering if telling them the truth would be a good idea considering the fact that Malfoy was the son of a Death Eater and Ginny was quite different from the girl he knew. Perhaps he should have studied them longer and waited, but with his own Voldemort having arrived at this universe and from the constant pain of his scar, Harry knew that he had to gather as many people to help him as he could. He couldn't rely on Hermione and Ron as he could in his own universe so he would have to find others who would help him.

He had watched Malfoy in class and Ginny study and he knew both had enormous potential, especially when the Dark Arts were concerned. They both had had training in that subject because their families were Pure blood and, much as Harry would normally have hated to say such a politically incorrect thing, only Pure bloods could truly reach their potential early because they were the only ones to get training from birth.

He was taken from his musings when Ginny and Malfoy approached him, both eyeing the other casually and with their usual mask of disdain. Harry chuckled inwardly before he took a step towards them, whispering "follow me" and leading them towards the Room of Requirement. Both were thrown off balance at the sight of the other following Harry as well but they couldn't seem to get his attention as he power walked ahead of him.

Even though the Umbridge of his universe had found the Room of Requirement and set up various traps to find the members of the DA, Harry knew that no one else would be aware of it in this universe, except for perhaps Fred and George but since they were no longer in the school, Harry had no fear of being interrupted. After opening the door and waiting for both of them to enter, he himself entered and then made sure to lock to close the door properly before turning to both of them.

“What the hell is going on Potter? I thought this would be a PRIVATE conversation.” Malfoy sneered, eyeing Ginny as if she were some particularly stubborn speck of dust that he was unable to shake off his robes. Ginny glared back at him in much the same way, perhaps with even more hatred.

“That’s enough from both of you.” Harry said sharply. “What I am going to tell you will need to be kept a secret, and I WILL know when you tell someone or ATTEMPT to tell someone.” He tapped the end of his wand against his temple. “What is said in this room REMAINS in this room, which is why being civil with each other will not destroy the other’s reputation with the school.”

“You’d better tell me WHY I’m here first Potter. I’m not going to stick around if this isn’t worth a damned thing for ME.” Malfoy said, turning his glare on Harry.

“I am not the Harry Potter you know. I am from another universe.”

There was silence in the room as Ginny and Malfoy stared at Harry. Harry, maintaining his air of utter calm, moved to sit on one of the chairs by a small table set for three. “My name IS Harry Potter, but in my universe I am the Boy Who Lived, not Neville. My parents are also dead in my universe, as is my godfather Sirius, all three of who were innocent of any crimes that were charged against them. I was brought here by mistake when Hermione and Ron did a summoning spell in the Restricted section. The real Harry Potter is dead.”

Again, silence. Then both started laughing hysterically. Harry waited until they had finished laughing before he spoke again.

“Ginny, you found a diary of Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort when he was sixteen years old and he forced you to write messages in blood on the walls and to kill the roosters in Hagrid’s pen. He was going to kill you, suck the life force out of you and then he was going to use the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets to kill all of the people in Hogwarts, specifically the Muggle-borns.” Ginny stopped laughing and paled to a dangerous shade of white. Malfoy glanced at her, then

back at Harry, trying to find a joke but couldn't seem to get the laugh quite out of his lungs.

"And you Malfoy, you know that Sirius is innocent. Not only that, he is related to you by the Black blood in your mother. You also know about his Animagus form and that Voldemort has a servant, Peter Pettigrew, who is responsible for framing him and my parents for crimes they didn't commit." Again, silence. Malfoy wasn't even trying to hide his gawking now.

"I know all of this because I am not FROM this universe. Ginny, in my universe, I was the one that saved you from the Chamber of Secrets. I can speak Parseltongue and I entered the Chamber of Secrets through the sink in Moaning Myrtle's lavatory, and I took the Gryffindor Sword from the Sorting Hat, and I killed the Basilisk. I was there. I know that you didn't deserve to be suspended and placed on high alert with the other teachers. I know that none of the things in my second year were your fault and in my universe you were not blamed. In fact, it was Malfoy's father who slipped the diary into your cauldron when we were in Flourish and Blotts getting our school books." He slowly turned to stare at Malfoy. "Now you understand why this can't leave the room? If someone were to tell Voldemort that another Boy Who Lived existed, one who has survived him for five years of attempted assassinations, he would be quite adamant about finding out, now wouldn't he?" Malfoy very slowly, almost cautiously, nodded his head.

"H-Harry," Ginny whispered, eyes hollow, "why are you telling us all of this? Isn't it dangerous to tell us so much about yourself?"

"I had to tell you, because the Voldemort of my universe has somehow managed to come here." Malfoy and Ginny exchanged glances, without thought of course. They would never admit that they felt the same cold fear at his words.

"ANOTHER You-Know-Who?"

"A more powerful one from what I've been told of the Voldemort here." Harry said, taking a deep breath. "The Voldemort of my

universe took my blood to resurrect himself after he... killed Cedric. I was placed into the TriWizard tournament by Moody, who was actually Barty Crouch Jr. in disguise. The point is, I was placed there without my knowledge and I was forced to complete all of the tasks. I won, though you can obviously understand I wasn't happy about it. Cedric should have won..." Harry got a distant look then shivered. "It doesn't matter, the point is that he's here and I need recruits. More specifically, I have to start up my DA class again. And before you ask, my DA class is a class I started in secret while a woman named Umbridge was here." Ginny made a disgusted face. "I wanted to ask both of you if you would join."

"Potter, I don't know what you're on, but I think you're insane." Malfoy snarled, glaring at him. "This is all a bloody joke right? Well thanks for wasting my bloody time, I'm getting out of here."

"If you don't believe me you can always check my scar." Harry said calmly.

"Oh right! You have a bloody scar just like Longbottom don't you?" Malfoy demanded. Harry moved aside his long bangs (which he purposefully allowed to grow almost into his eyes just to hide it) and waited for comments. Ginny walked closer, fascinated, and began to examine it. "Oh wow Potter! It LOOKS real, but IS it real?! You're not going to fool me THAT easily!"

Ginny took her wand out and pointed it at his forehead. Harry resisted the urge to curse her in the flash of an eye, waiting for her. "Finite Incantatum!" Nothing happened. Ginny tried again, and again, but still nothing happened. Harry felt a slight tingle in his scar but nothing more, staring up at Ginny patiently.

"It's real." Ginny mumbled, looking awed. Malfoy looked near crying by now, so frustrated was he with this turn of events. Here he had what could be dubbed the most valuable knowledge in the world, and he couldn't TELL anyone. Harry grinned once she had said this, moving to stand.

“That’s right, it IS real. Now, will both of you please consider what I have said? When you pass through that door you will be unable to talk about this except with each other and with me of course. Anyone else and you will be cursed so severely, you may never remember your own names.”

“Do Hermione and Ron know about this?” Ginny asked, looking even more awed with every word Harry spoke.

“About the DA? No, they don’t. And I don’t want them to be involved in this. The Hermione and Ron that I know are... braver and stronger than those two idiots I’ve met.” Harry’s face contorted with suppressed anger. Malfoy was about to make a snippy comment but restrained himself. “We’ll make a schedule if you both agree to come, but I want to learn from both of you and be able to teach you both. Perhaps we’ll gradually invite other students but for now I really wanted to ask both of you.”

“ Oh and why’s THAT Potter?” Malfoy demanded, grinning sarcastically.

“Because I can’t trust anyone but both of you to remain silent.” Harry said, without letting the annoyance show on his face. “And... I hope that perhaps you’re better in this universe than the cowardly prat who I grew up with.” He smiled faintly at Ginny. “I know that Tom Riddle was a mistake to you Ginny, but in my universe it made you all the stronger to have survived him. He took life force from me too.”

Ginny stared at him, immobile. She had a deeply thoughtful look, half way between detached and... sad. She slowly nodded. “I’ll think about it Harry. I can’t make any promises right now.”

“That’s all that I ask. Thank you Ginny.” He slowly glanced to Malfoy. “And you? Will you at least think about it?” Malfoy turned his eyes away from Harry’s intense stare. Malfoy could never remember Harry having that haunted, mature stare. Perhaps... he could at least see what it was like? And who KNEW what he could find out about Potter. If he couldn’t tell anyone, maybe HE could do Potter himself that

wouldn't require the involvement of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or his father.

"I'll sleep on it Potter. I'm not saying yes and I'm not saying no." He turned and walked out of the Room of Requirement. Ginny slowly lowered her hand to her backpack and pulled it over her shoulders, avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Good night Harry." She whispered before walking out after Malfoy.

Harry watched them go and sighed softly to himself. He hoped he hadn't screwed up doing this.

Chapter Twenty Four: An Unexpected Visitor and Consequences

Harry hadn't expected something to happen so quickly.

But it had. Here he was, sitting in Snape's office attempting to keep himself under complete control though his fingers were literally itching to reach for his wand and curse the living flesh off his Potions Master's flesh. Maybe if he cursed the jar of cockroaches and frog spleens over his head, the glass might cut into his skin and kill him inadvertently, making Harry innocent instead of guilty. Oh yes, that would be ever so vengeful and sweet. Not only were his wicked thoughts centered around Snape, but Evans as well.

Harry was quite sure that Evans was a great guy, really, he had to be in order for the Dumbledore of this world to have called him from the Ministry, and he probably was in Harry's universe too. Evans was probably a charming man who could wriggle his way into anyone's heart, but Harry hated him, HATED him with every fiber of his being right then.

It began earlier in the day, after his Divination class. He didn't know why he thought that Evans wasn't watching him but Harry had begun to ignore the fact that Evans followed him. Instead, he focused more on his studies and his Ancient Runes research to take his mind off of his protective shadow. He was walking with Hermione and Ron towards the Great Hall when he felt it, the soft tingling of his scar that meant that Voldemort was trying to see through his eyes. He could feel it now, that his parent's murderer was somehow stronger here. He was trying to get into Harry's mind, and Harry wasn't about to let him.

Harry began to push back, making his scar sting with energy at the two strong magicks trying to push into it. Hermione was arguing with Ron about homework when Harry saw him. The image was as vivid as if it was happening right in front of him, right under his nose. Voldemort was walking into Hogwarts.

He ran for the entrance to the school, ignoring Hermione and Ron yelling after him. He had to stop the bastard from getting into the school! He took out his wand, preparing to throw the first curse that

came to mind. He didn't get a chance to since when he reached the door, a spell was flying directly towards his face.

Something shoved him roughly against the door, allowing the spell to zoom by his ear and harmlessly hit the stone wall behind him. Harry struggled against the arm holding him and shot a spell, "STUPIFY!" and something made an "oof!" sound and fell to the ground. Wriggling away from Evans, he walked out and looked around desperately. There was no one there.

Harry looked around wildly, desperate to catch some glimpse of his attacker. By pure chance he tripped over the air. Before he could recover himself, Evans had already come up behind him and grabbed something... something that wasn't visible. Lifting it, he ripped off the Invisibility Cloak to reveal... Draco Malfoy? He was snarling, eyes burning with hatred.

"You bloody BASTARD! You sent my father to Azkaban!" He shrieked, trying to get at Harry; chopped, sharp fingernails trying to claw at him.

Harry felt his insides turn to ice as he stared at him, at the Malfoy of his universe. But... how could he be here? It wasn't... possible... how had he gotten here? How he knew that this wasn't the Malfoy he knew was simple. The look of pure hatred in his eyes, the way he seemed to SEE Harry as no one else here really had. He could feel it singing in his bones; this was the Malfoy that wanted to kill him.

"How do you like my gift Potter? I thought the two of you could become reacquainted. The boy was so adamant about coming with me to kill you." A soft, hissing voice drawled by his ear.

"I'll kill you Potter! Get OFF me! POTTER!" He continued struggling madly, looking tired, half-starved and disheveled, as if he had done nothing but wait for any and every opportunity to kill Harry. And somehow... Harry didn't doubt this. He looked like Sirius did at the prospect of killing Peter. Yes, he looked just like him.

"Stupify!" Evans whispered, pressing his wand to Malfoy's temple. Nothing happened at first, but Evans didn't seem bothered. He did the spell several times until Malfoy finally fell over, the protection spell

around his body slowly fading with unconsciousness. Harry knelt by the now-visible Invisibility Cloak, looking at it carefully when his heart nearly burst in his chest. There was a small "J" stitched into the back. He would never forget that mark. This was HIS Invisibility Cloak....

"That bloody bastard stole my cloak." Harry growled, hands clenching around the soft material. He couldn't help his anger, no matter how he fought it. This cloak was HIS, given to him by his father. It was probably the ONLY thing of his father's that Harry possessed (aside from his physical features of course). "I'll kill him." Harry growled, not quite sure if he meant Malfoy or Voldemort.

"Oh will you Potter? Perhaps you will... or perhaps I'll kill your parents in front of your eyes as last time." Voldemort laughed his cold, hair-raising laugh before pain shot through Harry's scar. Harry clenched his eyes, hissing but not screaming as he wanted to at that all too familiar pain. His scar began to bleed under his fingers but Harry was able to hold his hand over the wound until it stopped.

Evans looked from Harry down to Malfoy, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. Harry stuffed the cloak into his pocket, eyes narrowing as he looked towards the Forbidden Forest. A pair of red, glowing eyes were staring back at him as Nagini lifted up from the ground, hissing softly at him though he couldn't hear what she said. He could recognize her though, and he wanted to KILL her.

"Don't you dare go out there Potter. I won't be kind if I have to knock you out and drag you back into the school." He lifted Malfoy onto his back and walked down the steps, walking around the school's perimeter. Harry watched him go, then glanced back to find that Nagini was already gone. Taking a deep breath to try to calm himself, he followed Evans on his trek.

He continued walking until he came to a spot right across from the Whomping Willow, where the stonewall of the Hogwarts castle seemed a bit more dented inward than the rest of the great structure. Evans started feeling around with his fingers before nodding to himself, mumbling a spell under his breath and waiting as the stone moved backwards like a door, revealing a pitch-black passage which immediately sloped downward.

That was why he was in Snape's office now. He had been taken there through the tunnel.

Now Snape was leaning over him, eyes narrowed and teeth slightly bared.

"Now Mr. Potter... is there something you would like to share with us? You have been QUITE sneaky this year and perhaps it would be best for you to tell Mr. Evans and myself exactly what is going on? If you refuse, of course, I could always brew some Veritaserum. Or we could interrogate Mr. Malfoy over here, who I suspect isn't the Mr. Malfoy that we know in the castle since this one looks underfed and... shall we say... unkept. Now, what is it that you've been keeping from us?"

Oh how he wanted to curse that smirk off Snape's face. That... arrogant, victorious smirk. His scar began to burn, dripping blood into his face but he didn't care. He didn't even bother to hide it. Snape's eyes lifted to stare at the scar, looking less than predatory now. He looked almost scared... but he hid it well. Harry could smell the fear on him... could almost taste it on the tip of his tongue. Evans moved forward, wand at the ready. This didn't bother Harry, or even worry him. He could kill Evans with a bite.

"I am Harry Potter." He hissed. "And you are in my way."

Chapter Twenty Five: A Chat With the Snake

Snape growled and pulled out his wand but too late. He faintly realized that Harry's eyes were no longer green but an intense, terrifying crimson.

Harry's spell was shouted too fast for him to even hear what it was before he was flying across the room like a rag doll, crashing into the rack of ingredients he used for classes. In a calm, cynical portion of his mind he wondered who was stupid enough to place a spoon's worth of blue kindred powder into a jar of unicorn eyes. It was probably some Gryffindor student too lazy to put the proper ingredients back where they belonged. Or maybe some terrified Hufflepuff girl who didn't want to touch any of the ingredients and stain her dainty little hands. He would skin whoever dared to do such a thing...

Evans leapt out of the way and half shouted a spell before he too went flying across the room. He, however, wasn't as lucky as Snape. He had the misfortune of landing on Snape's advance sleeping draughts his seventh year Slytherins and Ravenclaws had been working on. He was cut by the glass vials and nearly lost an eye when the potion was injected into his body like venom from a snake's fang. He was no good to Snape now.

Snape clambered to his feet, rubbing the limp arm that bled profusely from where the edge of the shelf had ripped the skin off him. The blood formed a pool around his black shirt before dripping down onto the floor where chunks of his skin lay shriveled. He looked up to stare into those glowing red eyes... like the Dark Lord's unforgiving eyes. Harry's wand was glowing too, a deep green.

"I told you, you were in my way Severus." He hissed; his eyes narrowing amusedly as he savored the shocked and pained look on Snape's face. "You are the spy... you betrayed my secrets when I warned you of the consequences. I have been lenient with you time and time again; I took you in when no one else wanted you. I gave you everything you have now, all of the power, all of your strength and knowledge. I should take it back from your little mind as punishment; I could leave you as nothing but a vegetable like the

Longbottoms.” He lifted his wand and Snape felt his heart beat faster when he realized why he was trembling. This feeling... he only got this tingling in his stomach when he was in the presence of the Dark Lord.

“AVEDA KEDAVRA!” Harry screamed, green light exploding from the end of his wand. Snape barely managed to leap out of the way, struggling to find his wand between the broken wood and shattered glass. He cut himself in the process, making him cry out in anger and pain.

“POTTER!!” Harry chuckled, twirling his wand between his fingers. “I’m not Potter you fool. You know who I am... really; the boy could not possibly be any more stupid. One would assume that the boy would be more careful after having escaped me so many times.” He suddenly turned the wand towards his own arm and mumbled a spell, hissing slightly though he didn’t pull his arm back. Instead, a burn started to form at the tip of his wand, twisting and curling like smoke beneath his skin until there was something new there. It was something that seemed to please Harry. “Finally, he is marked. Not simply a scar anymore Potter, now so much more.”

Snape felt his own forearm tingling with the pressure of the wand at Harry’s words. “What are you doing?” Snape demanded in a whisper, already dreading the answer.

On Harry’s forearm was a snake curling around a skull. It was the Dark Mark.

“I’m marking him of course, Severus.” Harry said calmly, grinning. He was pleased with his handiwork. “I have never made a Dark Mark so clearly...” He turned to stare at Snape, eyes narrowed like a snake’s.

“Why are you invading his body?” Snape mumbled, straightening though he couldn’t take his hand away from the wound on his shoulder. Harry chuckled, a slight dimple forming on his right cheek as he did. He looked almost innocent now, almost like the Harry that Snape knew. He was not, however, deceived.

“It is because he has escaped me for long enough. The foolish boy thought that he could hide from me; he was planning to kill me. Without me, he would have no reason to live now would he? Ah, such wasted potential will be put to good use at last. He is still young; he will learn to serve me properly.”

“I... thought that Neville Longbottom was the chosen boy.” Snape said carefully. Harry glanced at him as if he were crazy then threw his head back and laughed. The laugh was different then Snape remembered. It was colder and angrier, something that Snape was not accustomed to. The Dark Lord always had an air of calm around him, and a sort of charmed indifference to the suffering of others. This Dark Lord seemed to become even bitterer with every word, absolutely no amusement in his cold red eyes.

“You must be spending far too much time among these children Severus. Potter has always been the boy. After I killed his mother and he still escaped me, of course he would be.” At this Snape stiffened.

“... Lily Potter escaped Azkaban during Christmas.” Snape whispered. Harry blinked, looking confused for a moment before laughing again.

“Potter’s mother is still alive in this world? How charming! I suppose his father is still alive as well then? But it would be far too much fun if his little godfather is still alive.” Harry seemed to be... a bit too pleased for Snape’s liking. No matter how much the boy looked like the Dark Lord right then, no matter how deranged and wicked his smirk was Snape still couldn’t bring himself to see anyone but Potter.

“They’re still alive.” Snape said carefully. “Sir, how did you... manage to get to Potter?”

“What an interesting question.” Harry said, purring thoughtfully. “Perhaps I’ll tell you.” He lifted the Invisibility Cloak from his pocket. “The boy’s precious little cloak. I knew that he would take it with him, of course, since it’s saved him so often from trouble. He’s so... sentimental, isn’t he Severus?” A change came over him and he

made a choking sound. "Stupid boy... stop fighting me." He hissed. Straightening, he resumed his usual smirk. "What was I saying? Ah yes... I put a simple possession spell into the cloak, one that would open our already rather tight connection. What do you think of it Severus?"

"I believe that it was quite brilliant my lord." Severus said carefully, staring at his master. "Though I can't really imagine what the boy can do for you. He's dense and slow, no use at all really. His power is meager and nothing compared to you my lord. And though yes, he would make an excellent body to spy with, there must be, perhaps, other bodies that would benefit you more my lord."

"Ah, so he has fooled you. I must say, the boy continues to impress me. You are quite perceptive, even in this universe Severus. He must have grown while here, fooling this world into believing that he truly is nothing but a soft, low quality wizard. But you must have guessed Severus; there is no way that you could have been as dense as to miss it entirely. The boy has far more power than even I estimated. He defeated me when no others have. He has foiled my plans even more than Dumbledore has ever dared. To possess brings me PLEASURE, knowing that I have finally beaten him."

"My... lord?" Snape tried slowly, watching Harry swell up larger, his entire form seeming to lift off the air an inch or too with this swollen ego.

"You don't like it, DO you Potter? How does it feel to be completely helpless in your own body? This is so much worse than Imperius because you can't FIGHT me anymore. You are MY slave. You honestly thought that you could do this for so long and believe that I would not win in the end? I am Lord Voldemort you fool! I am the greatest Dark Lord in the history of wizard kind!" Harry opened his mouth to continue but a spasm of pain shot through his stomach and he doubled over, moaning in pain.

His fingers trembled and dropped the Invisibility Cloak. The look in his eyes was hideous, furious, the look of a man so angry that he was ready to kill himself if it meant taking the entire world to hell with him.

The look ebbed slowly away as he fainted. His head made an interesting thumping sound when it hit the stone floor. Snape stared down at him, his expression worried.

He continued staring for several moments longer before slowly moving away from Harry (after taking the Invisibility Cloak and tossing it towards his desk with a piece of the broken shelf still red with his dripping blood). He went to the crumpled heap that was Evans.

His forehead was bleeding and he appeared to be sicker than Snape had seen him since he had been told that Lily Evans had been sent to Azkaban. His arms were under his head in a strange mimicry of sleep and he lay perfectly still. The only reason Snape knew that he was still alive was because there was an enlarged vein on his throat that was pulsing still. That must have meant that Evans was furious even in sleep. He would be even more so when Snape woke him.

Sighing, Snape surveyed the damage to his room and mentally went over all of the possible excuses that he could give to the Headmaster and the other teachers to explain it away.

He knew that he was meant to tell Dumbledore. This shift in the power spectrum would most likely win this damnable war and have everything over with. The problem was, of course, that Voldemort (a Voldemort, Snape was quite sure now that there were two) knew that the boy existed and knew of his potential. Not only that, Potter was a wild card. He was untamable as it seemed, and he would most likely not bode well if either one of the raging sides attempted to use him to win. He was, after all, more like Lily than he was James. James had no problem with being used for the great good. Lily was always ready to fight against such a restricting fate.

Harry groaned softly from where he lay but he didn't move otherwise. Snape didn't look at him, so caught up in his own thoughts. He could always so that Harry had come to his class for extra potions training since the little brat was doing so badly in his class, and while here he had made a potion so powerful and so badly-made that he had nearly killed all of them. Evans, sensing the danger, had created a shield around the cauldron so that the contents wouldn't blow them all to

Hell, but the barrier hadn't been strong enough and, though the liquid stayed within the cauldron, they had all been thrown back violently.

Well, it had happened before (with Longbottom and Weasley) so the story had a ring of truth to it. And of course Snape could act better than pretty much any man alive (for survival reason of course) so no one would doubt him. They also wouldn't say anything against Snape giving the boy a month's worth of detention or more in order to learn the new potions correctly and also for the damages done to his classroom.

Satisfied with the little white lie he had come up with, Snape began to fix his room to have the appearance it had the last time a natural disaster had come into his room waving around a wand and blowing up the place. He made sure to go through the "list-of-potions-that-go-boom-because-of-stupid-students" in his head as he sifted through his untouched private stash of potions and made sure to smear the cauldron with some, even turning on the stove underneath to melt the cauldron. He didn't mind so much since this was his least favorite cauldron.

When he had made sure the room was sufficiently ridden with evidence of this false occurrence, he turned back to Evans and Harry, both of whom had not moved from their positions on the floor. Snape bound his shoulder as best he could so that he wouldn't drip blood all over the floor and then levitated both Harry and Evans (after putting some of the potion in their hair and on their faces) before carting them up to the Hospital Wing, waiting patiently through the screaming Pomphrey's demands to know what happened and Dumbledore's nosy eyes.

Chapter Twenty Six: In the Mind of the Demented

Draco didn't know exactly how he had gotten to the Dark Lord's domain so late that night, or how he had managed to curse his mother when she tried to stop him, or how he had the blood of Muggles on his hands when he was standing before his master. In fact, he didn't remember anything at all after receiving the news of his father being sent to Azkaban.

He didn't love his father, far from it. No one could love that cold, evil man who only thought about himself. He admired the man for being so calculating, so crafty and adaptable, such a chameleon; he was a man who could be utterly wicked right under the Minister's nose and yet innocent enough to slip through the fingers of the Aurors when he went out Muggle-hunting. He was a powerful, handsome man with the world at his fingertips, a member of the Dark Lord's inner circle of Death Eaters, loyal to those who deserved it and perceptive enough to use every angle to his advantage with his enemies.

But he hadn't escaped this time. He had been caught, chained, disgraced and thrown into Azkaban. The last wasn't even necessary since everyone knew his secret now. He had no wall to hide behind anymore, no mask, no façade, no false innocence, nothing. He was completely exposed and vulnerable, his house was turned upside down and his secrets smeared all over the public eye. He was no longer Lucius Malfoy. He was simply a thug, a hit man, an assassin for the Dark Lord. And he was in Azkaban.

No one, of course, realized what kind of affect this would have on Draco. No one cared.

His mother cried for Lucius, just as she was meant to for the public. She carefully continued their Dark Arts for the Dark Lord and she always passed along messages meant for her husband so that, insane or dead, he always knew what was going on in the Wizarding World. She always had duties to fulfill, she always had a purpose, unlike her son. The house elves were constantly busy fixing the house every time the Aurors raided the house for Death Eaters, kidnapped wizards and witches, Dark Arts weapons, anything to add

more charges to Lucius's record. All of this happened, this madness came anew, at least once every week.

For Draco's sixteenth birthday, a day meant to have been one of the most important days of his life, he had to hold his mother back while the Aurors ripped apart her and Lucius's bedroom, taking her jewelry to inspect for charms (jewelry that had belonged to her great, great grandmother once), taking the paintings, the furniture, everything. She had been really crying, screaming at them to get out of her house. She HATED them for robbing all of the things she held precious. What no one realized, not even his own mother, was that Draco hated the Aurors even more than anyone else.

The house was bare. They had to sleep on the floor, without blankets, less than the house elves. The Malfoy fortune was slowly but surely being emptied from their Gringotts vaults and Narcissa wouldn't dare touch their over-seas accounts for fear of getting caught. The money was placed into a trust fund that Draco would only receive when he turned 21, money that would probably be tagged just in case the son went the same way as the father. They had to buy food for themselves since they couldn't stand to be in their own house, alone, with NOTHING.

In the stores, they were ridiculed. They weren't even safe in Knockturn Alley. Draco and his mother had stones thrown at them, and spells. They had nearly been killed on more than one occasion but they always held their heads high, pretending not to see or hear anything said around them. The DISGRACE, all of it, they couldn't give in. They had to be proud, they had to ignore their fall from grace.

And Draco was ignored. No one bothered to think of him, no one knew him as anything but "Malfoy's son". He was left alone, with no friends, no money, not even a room to cry in. He had nothing. He had no one. He had no chance now, soon he and his mother wouldn't be able to afford to keep their mansion, and the Malfoy house would be lost, probably torn to pieces for more charms and spells. They would be homeless, even poorer than the Weasleys.

And, at the end of the day, who won out? The Weasleys and Harry Potter won out, that was who. The Mudbloods won out, the half-

bloods won out, the Purebloods were ridiculed and pushed into the background. The discriminated, ironically, turned and segregated the rich. Many awful things could be said about the Dark Purebloods, but one was not thievery. At least the Death Eaters didn't break into houses each week and steal the possessions of others.

The knowledge that he had nothing now, no one, no future, all of it, the knowledge that it was all Potter's fault sent fire coursing through his veins. At times Draco would black out and suddenly find himself in his mother's room crying, his hands soaked in blood. In the newspapers the next days, horrible, violent murders would be reported by Muggles and wizards alike.

Narcissa knew immediately what had happened. His aunt, Sirius's mother, had gone insane as well when she realized that her only living descendent and heir to her entire estate was her betrayer of a son. She had gone insane, taking her house elves into the madness with her. Kretcher, the most loyal of her house elves, nearly killed himself when he discovered that the honorable beheading of his own head, that virtuous moment, was ignored in favor of a funeral. His mistress's funeral to be exact.

Narcissa knew that the only way to take care of her child was to get him away from the house and send him away. He was slowly going mad, she could see it in his eyes every day. His arrogance and childishness had vanished nearly overnight. He wasn't amused by petty pain. He searched for torture, death, he was a man before his time.

Narcissa scheduled a Portkey to take him out of the country and to a little villa her distant family owned in Greece. She was sure that a bit of fresh air and a break from the massive amounts of stress on her only child would help bring him back to his senses. That was when she discovered that the Aurors were keeping close tabs on both of them. They intercepted her owl post and fireplace calls. They managed to cut off the Portkey. They were trapped in their own house.

Draco and his mother were not permitted to leave the house after they found one particularly powerful hexing charm in one of Draco's

birthday presents. Eventually, even the house elves were taken away from them and questioned extensively before being sent to a temporary holding cell in Azkaban until more information on the Malfoy family could be found. They would lose the mansion soon, there was literally nothing left inside of their once-luscious home, and then one day, Draco simply snapped.

This was the day that Draco came to be in the Riddle house, eyes filled with angry tears, trembling with lunacy and rage. He wanted to kill things, he didn't know what exactly, and he didn't care. Someone had to be punished, and in some befuddled part of his mind he knew that the ones responsible were Potter and the Weasleys. No matter how distracted he became with killing Muggles or even Aurors, no matter how much he would cry and rock himself in deserted alleys, he never lost sight of this one truth.

The Dark Lord received him with surprise. His other Death Eaters were out in Europe, creating chaos and death, leaving their master alone to scheme.

No doubt he looked a mess, Draco told himself, as he walked into the Riddle house, bloody hands at his sides, his Death Eater mask half seared off by a spell. He knew he was bleeding somewhere else on his body but he didn't know where and he honestly didn't care. The blood kept him grounded and half sane.

"I want to kill Potter. Where is he?" Draco said, perfectly calmly.

The Dark Lord watched him, surprised by the fearless look in his eyes. He had seen Draco before, during his initiation three years ago. The boy had been little more than a nuisance with the potential to be great, just as everyone had that potential. He was also a petty rival of Potter, though this relationship was also just a shadow of what it could have been. But now... Draco had that look that a determined man had, not a little boy who wanted to play dress-up and impress his father. Draco was out for blood, he was out to kill, and he was going to bring everyone to Hell with him.

“I believe I may know where he is.” The Dark Lord said, offering Draco a seat.

“Thank you my lord.” Draco said politely, taking the seat.

“Please, call me Voldemort.” He said. Draco paused, befuddled again but still unafraid, before nodding his head.

“Thank you Lord Voldemort. Now where is Potter?”

“I believe he was taken from this existence through a spell, a very powerful, dark spell. The only reason I know this is because I felt him leave this existence. He isn’t dead, he is in another universe, from what I have gathered through his dreams. He is trying to find a way back here, but I wish to have him killed as soon as possible.”

“I will do it Lord Voldemort.” Draco said, his pupils diluting noticeably. “I want to kill him with my bare hands.”

“You will have your chance Draco, this I promise you.” The Dark Lord said, keeping his eyes on Draco’s wand. The boy was psychotic; there was no telling what he would do. Draco stared at him boldly, ignoring the fact that he was beside the one man he feared just as much as he feared his own father.

“I want you to send me to that universe.” He said, eyes becoming a bit saner, a bit more coherent, as he spoke. “I want you to use me and my magic if you must; I want you to use me as an experiment if you wish. But I want to go to that world and I want to kill him.”

“As I said, you shall have your chance Draco.” The Dark Lord stood, eyes glowing red as he offered his hand. Draco stared at those long, spider-like fingers before taking it. He had never touched the Dark Lord before. He felt... cold. And he felt slightly wet too, like one would expect a serpent nesting in a cave to feel.

“You shall undergo many tests Draco.” The Dark Lord began, catching Draco’s wandering attention. “We must be prepared to bring

you back if the spell begins to go awry. Maintain your faith in me, I shall send you to him. And you shall bring me to that world as well. There are... important differences there which I wish to experience for myself. Do not lose sight of why you came to me Draco, do not forget that you are my Death Eater, now and for always. The brand on your arm binds you to me, never forget.”

Draco nodded blankly. “I shall do as my Lord wishes.”

The process of prepping Draco for universe-hopping was not quite as easy as Harry’s trip had been. For Harry, there was simply confusion and then a splitting headache from landing the wrong way. Draco, on the other hand, was wrenched into Hell, ripped out of Heaven, thrown into Purgatory, smashed into one-dimensional planes, chopped up into pieces in the Land of the Ancient Gods, and finally brought back to his own world with nothing but salted wounds from his adventures. He would have been thrilled if the process had not been so painful.

The spells they used sent him to places he had never been and some, he hoped to never enter again. Never once did he complain about the damning of his soul. His resolve grew and his mind calmed with each experience, making him that much more determined to go to this new universe to kill Potter.

Voldemort was always there, growing increasingly angry when a spell didn’t work and Draco was not sent to the correct universe. The process was long and grueling and his guinea pig looked as if he couldn’t take another foul-up. That was when his prayers were answered.

One of Voldemort’s loyal agents sent a package to Riddle Manor. Voldemort opened it to discover Potter’s precious Invisibility Cloak. There is a common known fact in the Wizarding world that for a spell to become more powerful, one must use his or her blood to intensify the spell. The next best thing is something close to the person the spell is directed to, such as an Invisibility cloak which held sentimental value.

With the cloak in hand, both Voldemort and Draco were able to make their way into this new universe. The ride was rough, the pain enormous, but neither one so much as winced.

Chapter Twenty Seven: The Snowball Effect

Harry wasn't sure where he was at first. All he knew was that his eyes were open but he couldn't see anything. He felt as if his mouth had been sewn shut, probably because he had refused to drink anything, even to soothe his parched lips. He didn't much mind this feeling though, since he didn't want to speak anyway. Now he remembered where he was and why he had longed to forget. He was in the Hospital Wing, in a cramped, uncomfortable bed, with a rock-like pillow and a thick, stuffy sheet over him. Of course, this hell was so much more comfortable and appealing than the real world. What he wouldn't give to stay where he was for the rest of his life.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are pleased to announce, for the benefit of your entertainment, that Harry Potter has official gone mad and can be viewed here." Harry thought to himself. "Now let this be a lesson to all of you. When you play with dimensional/transportation magic, the gods punish you."

Perhaps they were to blame for Voldemort having somehow arrived in this dimension, and with such lousy timing too. Maybe the gods were so pissed at him for trying to study their domain that they had let the old snaky bastard find the way to this hidden, cozy little universe where the Voldemort wasn't nearly as powerful nor as dangerous. Where his parents were alive and where he was an idiot.

He had been stuck in the hospital wing for nearly five hours now, staring at a clumsy and desperate fly attempting to wriggle out of a spider web pass the time, trying to pass the time. Snape and Evans had brought him here after he had passed out. For some reason, seeing the dark mark on his own forearm hadn't made him vomit until AFTER he had arrived. Some remote part of his mind had expected him to throw up long before then as a result of his own disgust. Why, it took a good fifteen to twenty minutes to reach the Hospital Wing from the dungeons, so he had that amount of time to absorb his new tattoo and throw up his insides as any child who's parents had been killed by Voldemort should have.

He hadn't really listened when Pomphrey questioned him as to why he had the dark mark on his arm. She had checked on him a week

prior to this incident to make sure that his previous attempt at universe-hopping hadn't caused any damage she had missed. Since there had been no dark mark a week ago, she knew that he had not been a death eater before. In fact, she was very reasonable about the whole thing, after Snape spoke to her at length about what had happened. She even agreed to keep it a secret, including from Dumbledore. She had gone so far as to cover the paintings in the ward so that Dumbledore wouldn't have any spies coming to tell him secrets.

Madame Pomphrey was a godsend at that moment, and Harry appreciated all that she had decided to do on his behalf, but he just couldn't show her just how relieved he was about her helping him. Truth was that he wasn't that relieved. He just didn't care anymore. In fact, he WANTED people to notice that maybe he wasn't the Harry they had grown up with, that he was a Harry far older and more powerful than they could ever imagine their Harry ever becoming.

On that day, when he was staring at the wall, Harry began to contemplate some of the feelings he was having; or rather, the lack there of. Something in Harry was alarmed at this strange, blank feeling that forbade panic, but the rest of him was perfectly content to remain numb. When Snape came to check on him for a second time that day, after his fifth year Potions class, he found Harry lying in bed staring at nothing, a defeated quality in his eyes. This was when Snape began to lose his patience.

"Stop being a lazy arse and get out of that bed, Harry Potter. Now." Snape snarled, too annoyed to attempt kindness. Some delicate Hufflepuff girl had dropped a vial of a rather foul-smelling ingredient and the stain had taken several spells to come out. He was not in the mood to play hero-worship with a moody teenager, especially one that he was coming to truly dislike. Harry glared at him, and turned over. Snape felt a vein throbbing at his temple, fighting back the urge to curse him instantly. "Get up NOW before I make you get up. You're healed; there's no reason to stay here anymore."

"No reason to stay?" Harry hissed softly, turning to glare at him again. "How about being branded by that... that... MONSTER who

killed my parents? The man who's been after my life since my birth? How about because I'm alone and friendless in a world that isn't even mine?" He snorted venomously, fighting back tears of frustration. "A place where my parents are alive but fugitives, accused of hurting me when I was a baby." He stared fully at Snape now, his eyes glowing with anger. "I've never been accused of weakness before. Never. But since I've been here, everyone seems to think I'm some delicate piece of porcelain. I show the shadow of a thought and everyone assumes something is wrong with me and dismisses me!"

Snape listened to all of this quietly, his annoyance slowly draining out of him not because of Harry's words, but rather because Harry was finally opening up to him. He had no idea what to do now that Harry had confessed to having come from somewhere else, possibly another existence. Yes, his suspicions had been confirmed, but he hadn't had any time to really consider what to do afterwards. He could certainly go tell Dumbledore like a good little spy. Or he could go and tell the Dark Lord, also like a good little spy. Or (and this one he was seriously considering) keep the information to himself and find a way to somehow use it to protect his own interests.

This boy was an unknown element no one had anticipated. Whether he was powerful (and he was) or not, that wasn't the point. He was a wildcard, and no one could possibly know what to expect of him. He had the face of Harry Potter, a known screw-up, but his mind and his eyes were that of someone who had stood at the gates of Hell and come back alive, with scars to show. Fighting someone with such fire in their soul always turned out for the worse, Snape had come to realize. He just wasn't willing to turn in the boy, not just yet anyway. If he was already opening up, maybe he could get Harry to tell him more details of his place of origin. Maybe he knew some valuable information?

"Snape, I don't want to stay here anymore." Harry whispered, getting his Potions Master's attention. His eyes were haunted and empty. "I don't want to have to go through this anymore. I don't want to fight Voldemort anymore. I don't want to go through all of this anymore. I just want to go home to my friends and the little family I have left." He sat up.

“What happened to your family?” Snape asked, buying time. He wasn’t sure why he couldn’t let Harry leave, but he knew that allowing the boy to escape would be a devastating move. The boy needed attention, much as he hated to admit it. He had a lot to say and no one seemed to be willing to listen. If he closed off now, he might never open himself up again, and that could be a problem if Snape ever wanted to get any other kind of information from him. Harry didn’t seem to notice Snape’s intentions anyway. In fact, he seemed eager for an audience.

“Voldemort murdered them when I was a year old.” He stated, his hands clenching the bed sheets around him. “Then the bastard went and tried to kill me when I was in Hogwarts. He...” at this point Harry began to become choked up, his face burning red with anger and frustration, “he helped Bellatrix Lestrange and a load of his Death Eaters escape Azkaban. And he let Bellatrix... he let... I couldn’t get to him! Remus wouldn’t let me get to him! He just... fell in! The bastard FELL INTO THE STUPID VEIL! It was so stupid! It was VEIL! It shouldn’t have... but he’s dead now. He’s dead... my only family. And after they were about to clear his name and he would have taken me away from those horrible Dursleys and I would have had a piece of my dad and...” by this time Harry was choking and sobbing so hard that any other words were muddled and incoherent.

Snape simply watched him, not interrupting. He knew very well what it felt like, that moment when one could unload all of the troubles and agonies of the world onto the nearest human being. He had done the same a long time ago after Lily’s death. He had purged his dark soul of all the horrific things he had done and seen, and there was no force in heaven or hell that would have been able to stop him. Harry was doing the same right now.

“They’re all dead now; mum, dad, Sirius, they all died protecting me. And he killed Cedric for being WITH me.” He chuckled very softly. “Kill the spare. Kill the bloody spare for just standing there! For being in the wrong place at the wrong time! And then Dumbledore wouldn’t even let Ron and Hermione write to me over the summer! What bloody harm is there in it? Does he think I LIKE living with those bloody Dursleys? Because I don’t! I hate them! I hate Dumbledore! I

hate everyone! I don't want to BE here anymore! I want to go home!
I,"

"Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore came into the Hospital Wing, his eyebrows raised as he watched the young man crying hysterically. He glanced at Snape once, surprised by the deer-in-the-headlights look he received from him. "Whatever is the matter?"

Harry lifted his head weakly from his trembling hands stared at Dumbledore for a long time, not saying anything. Snape felt himself caught between protecting the boy and protecting himself. He wasn't sure why he felt that Dumbledore threatened the boy's safety but Dumbledore was just so damned manipulative.

"Mr. Potter, what is the matter?" Dumbledore asked again, his tone more commanding. Still no answer. Harry slowly lowered his head, staring at the floor. Snape could sense the impending storm. Harry was taking a deep breath, about to scream his outrage perhaps, or maybe to cry, or maybe to curse them all to hell...

The doors flew open at that moment and in came Hagrid, dragging a struggling Malfoy behind him. "Dumbledore!" He roared, more furious than Harry had ever seen the usually peaceful half-giant. Closely following Hagrid was Evans, disheveled and with a minor burn on his right shoulder. Malfoy continued struggling in Hagrid's grip, his eyes feral and filled with fury. "Dumbledore, I tell you this boy is mad! Bleedin' bonkers!"

"He attacked us!" Evans joined in, red with rage. "We were having a conversation and the boy, calm as you please, comes up and tries to curse us!" Harry wasn't looking at anyone but Malfoy, his eyes focused intensely on that pale face. Malfoy had calmed down, his hateful eyes piercing Harry's.

Dumbledore watched Malfoy's face thoughtfully, his own clouded with a thoughtful expression. "Mr. Malfoy, what is the meaning of this?"

"None of your bloody business." He hissed. Dumbledore's eyes widened at his insolent tone of voice and his words. No student dared

speak to him in such a way, at least not without provocation of some kind. And as far as he knew, he had never offended Malfoy like this.

“That’s quite disrespectful, Mr. Malfoy.” He chastised. He was surprised when Malfoy didn’t wince.

“What do I care what you say, you old dirt bag? I don’t have to worry about you.” Malfoy said softly, not removing his gaze from Harry’s. “The Dark Lord is here now, you know. And I’m the one that helped him get here.” He sneered triumphantly. “And this stupid universe won’t last long with him around. He’ll kill everyone... Muggle-borns, wolves, and DOGS first.” At this he laughed hysterically, shaking with his own mirth.

Harry felt a shiver go up his spine. Malfoy had completely lost his mind to be delighted by the slaughter that would follow. How had MALFOY brought Voldemort to this universe anyway? It must have been the cause of his madness. Did this mean that Harry would go mad as well? Did this mean that his own universe would be safe now, without the tyrant around to torture and murder people anymore? Maybe he was better off... staying here and dying with the rest of them. Voldemort wouldn’t have to go back if he had this weaker world all to himself.

“Did you hear me Potter!” Malfoy suddenly screamed, his entire body shaking. Dumbledore, Hagrid, Snape, and Evans all turned to look at Harry. “You think you’re so smart Potter! You think that just because you’re the Golden Boy Gryffindor that you’re safe from him! He got strong since you’ve been away.” He laughed wildly, his eyes crazed. Harry felt sick, staring into those burning, icy eyes. There was no humanity left in them. No petty pride or selfishness... simply madness and hurt and vengeance. “You’ll be the last to die, after every single person you love.”

“Shut up Malfoy.” Harry finally snarled, his hands clenching into fists. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re saying. You don’t know what he’s going to do in this place.”

“Oh don’t I Potter? I’ve seen what he does. Hell, I’ve HELPED him do loads of stuff. I’ve helped him torture Muggles and Mudbloods. I’ve enjoyed every minute of it!”

“You’ve never been on the receiving end!”

“That’s because I’ve always followed him! I wasn’t stupid enough to get in his way! To deny him my alligence was suicide, both for me and my family.” Harry said nothing, glaring at him. “You bastard.” At this, the madness seemed to ebb into pure, cold hate. “You don’t know what you did, getting my dad into prison, do you? You don’t know what you put my mother through.”

“I’m sorry Malfoy. I never did any of this to hurt your family.” Harry said softly, surprised at how easily the apology escaped his lips. He thought it would have been more painful. “But you have to understand. I did this to survive. I didn’t do this to hurt anyone.”

“You bloody liar.” Malfoy growled, showing his teeth. “Don’t lie. You KNOW you did this for the fame.”

“Why the bloody hell would I want this fame?” Harry exploded, eyes blazing with fury. “Why would I want everyone to “know” me before they even meet me? How am I supposed to find people who like me for me and not for my fame? Why would I bother working hard in school if I’m probably going to die soon anyway? Why would I want this?”

“That’s enough from the both of you.” Snape said quietly, avoiding Dumbledore’s gaze. He knew that the old man was probably furious with him for stopping their tirade of fighting but he couldn’t afford to let them continue. They were giving away too much too quickly and too random of an order to make any sense of it. Malfoy turned his gaze to glare at him.

“Fucking traitor.” He hissed. “The Dark Lord already knows about your betrayal. He isn’t going to be forgiving anymore, not with you. You’ll be the next to go, after the dogs.” At this he turned to smirk at Harry. “Going to watch him die a second time Potter?”

Harry suddenly leapt forward and punched him in the face hard. Malfoy yelped in surprise then snarled, drawing back his fist and punching Harry in return. Within seconds the two were rolling around the Hospital Wing floor, wrestling with each other. Hagrid dove his massive trashcan-sized hands down and retrieved the battling pair. Malfoy had a bleeding nose and a darkening eye whereas Harry sported a cut and bleeding bottom lip and a bruised cheek. Both were struggling to kill each other still.

“That’s enough!” Dumbledore boomed in a commanding voice. Both reluctantly stopped and turned to glare at him. “Now... I want to know exactly what is going on here.” Evans glanced at Snape’s back but Snape didn’t turn to look at him. “Well?”

There was a loud crash from the entrance to the Hospital Wing and both Hermione and Ron came in, closely followed by Neville, who came tromping after them with a plate of desserts, probably from dinner. The three paused when they saw the scene before them. A long silence followed in which everyone stared at one another nervously. Ron finally cleared his throat. “Er, anyone care for a pastry?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Cat's Out of the Bag: Part One

Lily sat beside James in the cave, staring down at her hands. The two of them had been waiting most of the day for Sirius to return with food and maybe a newspaper, to tell them what was going on in the world around them. They had tried talking for a while, but they very quickly realized that they didn't have anything to say. They could talk about Harry, but that would have been torture considering just how close to them he really was. They could have talked about Azkaban, but the chill of the name itself still brought horrible memories and emotions of Hell on earth. They could have talked about what they would do when (and if) their names were cleared, but that was a very big if, far in the unreachable future, and again torture.

Harry was their destined future. They wanted to bring him to live with them, not in Godric's Hollow since that had been destroyed, but maybe in Grimwald Place (they would have a lot of cleaning up to do), but the point was that they wanted to raise their child, even if only for the last few years before he became an adult and could live on his own. Would he want to live with them after everything that had happened? Could he live with all of the rumors that his parents had abused him and that both they and his godfather were still loyal to the Dark Lord? How would he react if they even asked for him to leave the house he had grown up in and come to a moldy, dust-covered hellhole that would take months to clean, just to be with them? Was it even worth wondering about?

Lily shifted and rested her head on James's shoulder, hugging his arm to her frail chest. At first James stiffened, but he gradually relaxed and kisses the top of her head, smiling affectionately at her. Touch was still a foreign concept to him, after having been stuck by himself for so many years. He had ached for his wife's touch for so long now, that even a simple sign of affection like a hug scalded him. He was slowly becoming more accustomed to the feel of flesh, however, so he didn't react as badly as he did the first time she had thrown herself at him (the moment they escaped Azkaban). "Are you tired sweetie? You know you can sleep if you need to."

"The nightmares will come back." Lily reminded him, nuzzling his shoulder comfortably. She only felt safe like this, hugging James to

her chest. That way, no one would be able to pull him away from her. She would be left with... nothing if they took James away from her too. She would be a shell. No dementor could do worse to her. "Besides, I've slept enough. When can we see Harry?"

"Have patience darling." James whispered to her, twisting to wrap his other arm around her. He kissed along her neck soothingly, rubbing her back. "We can't just barge into the castle, demanding to see him. They might have guards protecting him in case we do something like that. He'd be too confused to know what to do."

"I want to see him." Lily said simply.

"I do too sweetie." James kissed the top of her head again. "But we have to wait a little longer, okay? We have to make sure we don't get caught. Harry wouldn't like that." Lily sighed her consent as she snuggled more against him. James only rubbed her back gently to soothe her. He too wanted to see Harry. The last time he had seen his son was when Harry was only a little older than a year old, just big enough to hold in one hand (much as Lily hated him not holding onto Harry with both arms) and now, he was probably too big to even carry anymore. What had they done to his son? Was he more like Lily or himself now? Or was he completely different than either of them? What house had he gotten into? What were his grades like? Who had been taking care of him? Did he get on the Quidditch team? Had he been sent to an orphanage?

A rustle from the cave entrance made both fugitives stiffen instinctively. A shock of red hair was the first thing the two saw. Sirius was NOT a red head, nor was he nearly as bulky as the young man who came into the cave, accompanied by a brown-haired girl. Both peered around the cave and blinked when they noticed Lily and James staring at them with abject horror. Silence filled the dark pit of dirt as they observed each other.

"I thought you said this place would be empty?" The boy whispered to his companion. James mentally calculated how he could get Lily and, hopefully, himself out of the cave without having to attract the

attention of all of Hogsmead. These children hopefully didn't scream very loud.

"Harry, we've been looking all over for you!" The girl finally said, moving forward quickly to hug James. Lily screamed and quickly reeled back against the wall of the cave, her arms covering her face. James had a similar reaction except that he managed to get his stolen wand out of his pocket fast enough to point it at the strange girl. "Who the hell are you!" He demanded, his throat unusually dry. Merlin, PLEASE don't let them be caught!

The girl stepped back, surprised at the threatening wand pointed at her forehead. She and the red-haired boy exchanged glances before she turned back to him. "You're not Harry?" She peered closer at him for a long moment than frowned deeply. "No, you're not Harry... you don't look exactly like him."

"I'm..." he paused. Were they trying to trick him? They looked far too young to be Aurors, then again, maybe they were. They could possibly have just graduated from the Academy, or perhaps they had some kind of disguise spell (maybe some kind of Polyjuice potion?) and they were trying to get his guard down. Should he tell them what his name was?

"Well," the red-haired boy started, "do you know where Harry Potter is right now? We need to find him." At this, Lily rocketed to her feet. Her nails bit into James's arm as she latched onto him, maybe to keep herself from falling to her knees before them.

"You know Harry Potter?" She demanded, all fear instantly gone at the mention of her son. Both the girl and the boy exchanged looks again, this time far more cautious.

"Are you professors at Hogwarts?" The girl asked carefully. The looks on their faces instantly told her the answer she wanted. She turned to the redhead, completely ignoring James and Lily. "Ron, he has to be in Hogwarts. But we can't let anyone see us or there'll be even more danger than there already is for him."

“Well, I brought his cloak, but I think that with all the dementors snooping around Hogsmead, we’ll be lucky to get halfway to the castle before they catch us and tear us limb from limb.” He said dryly. “I don’t know about you, but I haven’t had a chance to really test out my Patronus since Harry left.”

“We have to find a way in!” The girl said, pacing frustratedly. James and Lily watched the two like hawks. It didn’t appear that they were going to harm them or even call the dementors for help since they themselves seemed fairly worried about the soul-sucking leeches. In fact, they didn’t seem at all scared of the two convicts, who everyone else feared. Well, one thing had to be said. Right now they were being ignored, but they could just be waiting for the two convicts to let their guard down. Any second now they could go running out of the cave, screaming their location to the world.

“Please don’t tell anyone we’re here.” Lily whispered. The brown-haired girl stopped her pacing and finally looked at Lily, as if she had just remembered they had an audience. She suddenly looked nervous.

“You’re not... Death Eaters... are you?” The redhead, Ron, visibly stiffened and curled his fingers around his wand. James noticed the casual movement and tensed at the unacknowledged caution.

“You don’t know who we are?” Lily said, staring at them. When both brown-haired girl and red-haired boy shook their heads, Lily and James looked at each other worriedly. Finally, Lily chuckled and shrugged.

“Lily Evans Potter, escaped Azkaban fugitive. A pleasure to meet you.” James slowly lowered his wand and offered them a ghost of his old smirk.

“And I’m her ruffled husband, James Potter. Sorry about the mess, we didn’t know we’d be having company.” Both strangers paled and took a visible step back at their declaration. James instantly stiffened again, worried that having revealed their identities had reminded them of the bounty on both Potters’ heads. Would they be caught

now? Damnit, they were just kids! He couldn't bring himself to hex them unless he absolutely had to.

"Hermione..." the redhead whispered, "Hermione, please tell me I didn't hear what I just heard." Hermione didn't seem capable of speech.

"You can't be... that would mean... but," the girl, Hermione, swayed for a moment before regaining her composure. Before anyone could say anything else, there was a growl from the entrance of the cave. Ron turned and paled at the sight of Sirius in his dog form, a newspaper baggy in his mouth with what smelled like food. James couldn't help feeling relieved knowing that his best friend was now there. At least now they had back up in case the two attacked or tried to run.

Much to their surprise, however, the two strangers weren't at all afraid of the growling mutt. "SIRIUS!" They both shrieked and leapt at him. Sirius's growl turned into a yelp of surprise as both Hermione and Ron hugged him as tightly as they could. He managed to squirm away from them and bound towards Lily and James, transforming back into his human form with the baggy still in his mouth. Hermione and Ron stared at the three of them wide-eyed.

"Do you think Harry knows about this?" Ron whispered to Hermione, though everyone in the cave could hear him easily.

"I think he does," Hermione whispered back, "and I bet he found out at the worst possible moment. You know how his luck is, and when his temper gets out of control."

"We have to get to him." Ron said, a little louder since he realized that everyone heard him whether he whispered or shouted. "It's not safe for him to be here alone anymore. At least before he could hide himself; no one knew where he was from, but with Voldemort here now..." the three adults gasped at the utterance of The Name, not because it was frightening to them, but because this obviously strange boy had decided to speak it allowed, almost without fear. Almost.

“Ron, you dimwit,” Hermione growled at him and smacked his arm. Ron instantly backed away from her with his hands raised defensively. “We have to find a way into Hogwarts.” She said irately, forcing herself to ignore her best friend’s idiocy.

“Good luck.” Sirius finally growled, standing protectively beside James, hands clenched. “There are thousands of dementors all around the school, just waiting for us to come within an inch of the boundaries. There’s no way you’ll get past them when you have our scent all over you.” At this he sneered. “You hugged me, remember?”

“Dementors can smell?” Ron asked, amazed.

“Yes yes, they can smell.” Hermione said dismissively. “But that doesn’t matter. We can sneak in through Honeydukes; when Harry did it, there weren’t any dementors following him. And since we look like the Hermione and Ron of this dimension, of course no one will think we’re not us.” The boy looked momentarily confused before the end of her sentence sunk in.

“Dimension?” Lily whispered quietly, resting her chin on her husband’s shoulder tiredly. All this excitement was draining her. Maybe she should have tried sleeping more before? “What are you talking about?”

Ron opened his mouth but Hermione beat him to it. “Don’t worry about it right now. The point is that we can get you into the school grounds. Since it’s still morning and the dementors aren’t allowed into the town while there are people around, you can sneak into Honeydukes with us.”

“And how will we do THAT?” Sirius growled, feeling a trap coming their way. “I can turn into a dog, you know that already, but James can’t and neither can Lily.” Hermione stared at him as if he was insane.

“James can turn into a stag, if I’m not mistaken. At least, that’s what you yourself told us back home and Harry’s Patronus proves it.” At

this the room went silent, more out of confusion than anything. Lily and James exchanged puzzled looks and Sirius simply stared at them.

“Now look who has to shut up!” Ron hissed to her. Hermione ignored him however.

“You don’t have to change into anything anyway. Animals can’t go into Honeydukes and a stag will draw too much attention. You can use this.” And she pulled out something soft, flowing, and silvery from her robe pocket. James couldn’t stop staring at it.

“... That’s my... Invisibility Cloak.”

“How’d you get that!” Sirius demanded, awestruck.

“Dumbledore gave it to Harry when he came to school. When you... well, you weren’t there anymore so someone had to give it to him.” Hermione said edgily. She didn’t want to give away too much information about her universe, since that was how major shifts in the balance of powers occurred, but she couldn’t leave them completely in the dark. She had always wanted to see these three, alive, but now that she was seeing them (especially Harry’s parents), she wasn’t sure what to say exactly.

“Hermione, maybe we should tell them?” Ron said quietly.

“NO, we CAN NOT tell them anything!” Hermione whirled on him, eyes blazing that he had even suggested such a thing in front of them.

“Can’t tell us what?” James asked carefully.

“It’s creepy,” Ron whispered to her, this time managing to go unheard by the other three in the cave. “And you know it is. We’re talking to three dead people, and all of them are suddenly alive and worried that we’re going to expose them. We have to tell them something.”

“It’s not our place to.” Hermione whispered back. “We can’t. In the end, it’s not our responsibility to tell them anything, not even about Harry. They’ll have to ask him.”

“What are you two whispering about now?” Sirius demanded, suspiciously glaring at them. Ever since he had entered the cave, he had been waiting for an attack from the strangers. How did they know about this little alcove? Scores of Aurors and dementors were searching for them using every magical means possible, and yet these two somehow managed to stumble all the way up the hill and somehow find the cave where the three of them had been hiding? Too much of a coincidence... their luck couldn’t be that bad. And yet here they were, completely unafraid and even... maybe sympathetic? But that made no sense! Children grew up fearing Black and the Potters, either because of rumors that they had all been working for the Dark Lord or because of what they had supposedly done to Harry.

“Just get under the cloak and we’ll take you to Harry.” Hermione said, already starting out of the cave. Sirius and James exchanged looks for a long moment before they put the cloak around themselves and pulled Lily in between them. Better to be caught together than to be left alone safe.

What a predicament this was! Longbottom, Weasley and Granger walking in on Draco fighting with Potter had not been part of the plan. Draco had wanted to slip another cursed talisman on Potter that would force him to open his chakras to the Dark Lord, but that seemed impossible at the moment. Hmmm, what to do. Well, he could always threaten one of their lives – that tended to work most of the time back home – but that was too cliché and boring for him. In order to torture them properly, he would have to take them somewhere more private and carefully go through his endless arsenal of ideas, all more creative and gruesome than the last. That and he would have to control himself so he wouldn’t kill them too quickly.

Truth was, he didn’t really want such a huge audience. He just wanted to be alone in a room with Potter in order to thoroughly beat the shit out of the little bastard. He wanted to make the self righteous little shit suffer before he killed him. But oh, that’s right, he wasn’t

allowed to kill the little golden boy. He had to drag his skinny ass back to the Dark Lord like a good little servant. Ah, sometimes Draco regretted signing over his life, will, and future to the Dark Lord. Such a niche usually forced him to limit his options when it came to torture and maiming. Then again, he was well known now for his creativity when it came to torturing a person and leaving no scars to betray the actions.

“Mr. Weasley, would you escort your friends back to the Gryffindor Common Room, immediately?” Dumbledore said with dangerous calm. This brought Draco’s attention back to the situation at hand.

“Awww, why make them leave so soon? The party just started!” He smirked widely, letting his eyes trail over to Potter. Yes, sweet, innocent little Potter, the same golden boy that had been the center of his wretched existence since his very first day in Hogwarts. “Don’t you want them to hang around Potter? You always loved putting them at the center of any danger, isn’t that right?”

“Malfoy, shut UP.” Potter hissed between gritted teeth.

“Bugger off Potter.” Draco growled back. “ You’ve stayed quiet long enough. I think it’s time that everyone here knew exactly who you are, where you’re from. It’s not nice you know, leaving everyone in the dark about something as important as your fame.” He smirked widely. “Poor Potter, always at the center of attention. Reporters couldn’t get enough of you. Don’t you remember fourth year Potter? The TriWizard Tournament? You weren’t even supposed to put your damned name in the goblet yet there you were, with the real champions. You had to cheat the whole way along, didn’t you? There was no way you could keep up with sixth year wizardry when you were a lowly fourth year.”

“ Malfoy, stop TALKING you bastard!” Harry whispered, looking furious but also a tad frightened. He was revealing too much. How the hell did he know Harry had cheated? Hagrid would never tell anyone, and neither would Moody he didn’t think. Well, he didn’t know anything really. But Malfoy... when had he become so damned perceptive?

“Remember how they found you Potter?” Draco continued, hissing. “Clinging to Diggory’s dead body, the TriWizard cup in your other hand. Couldn’t let go of it, could you Potter? Almost died but you couldn’t die without your precious victory in hand!”

“THAT WAS THE BLOODY PORTKEY!” Potter exploded, trying to leap at Draco. Weasley and Granger managed to hold him back. Their faces were white and terrified, just from listening to Draco speak about the death of someone they saw regularly and took for granted. After Cedric Diggory had graduated from Hogwarts, he started working at the Ministry, in the department of Quidditch and other wizarding sports. He always came to visit though, either to help Madame Hooch or to see his girlfriend, Cho Chang.

“Don’t lie, Potter.” Draco whispered, feeling the familiar anger surge through his body. Oh but if he could only choke him a little, maybe the Dark Lord wouldn’t mind so much then? He could almost feel the soft flesh of Potter’s throat suddenly tighten, restricting air to his lungs, the soft choking sound, the feel of his pulse speeding up and thumping against his fingers as they tightened, slowly, slowly pushing back his larynx until... no movement. Falling helplessly, lifelessly, slowly to the ground with no more strength than a deflated balloon. Oh, if only he could get away with it!

Dumbledore cleared his throat, making everyone in the room look at him. Snape had not dared to say anything thus far. Heh, he was trying to protect his own skin, the traitorous little parasite. But no matter, he would soon pay for his crimes. The Dark Lord always rewarded those loyal to him and those stupid enough not to follow orders or to betray him, well, there were very few of those still capable of speech.

“I think this has gone on for long enough.” Dumbledore said quietly. “I wish for Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, and Mr. Weasley to come with me to my office where we can discuss this civilly.”

“What do you hope to gain from discussing anything with me?” Draco growled, glaring at him. The old coot was loony in every

dimension it seemed, and just as blinded by the sparkle of potential hope. He thought he could save Draco when it was far too late. He couldn't even save Potter this time. Only Potter truly knew what was coming now that the Dark Lord of their universe was there.

"Why don't we use the dungeons instead?" Evans suddenly said, startling everyone. He had remained quiet up until now but he didn't seem bothered by all of the attention. "The dungeons are closer than your office, Mr. Dumbledore, and they are better equipped in case any truth serum is required to extra answers from unwilling mouths?"

Dumbledore didn't seem entirely convinced, yet he couldn't deny that a truth serum very well could be required. Finally he smoothed his hands over his robes and said, very calmly, "To the dungeons then."

To all of their surprises, Draco slowly grinned and relaxed. "Fine with me. All of you bastards can see what he really is now." He smirked at Harry. "No one to hide behind now Potter."

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Cat's Out of the Bag: Part Two

Everyone trudged, single file, down to the dungeons. First was Snape, closely followed by Malfoy, who had his hands in his pockets and walked with a visible bounce to his step. He even began to whistle at one point, a sad, haunting melody that amused him (and scared Ron and Hermione senseless). After Malfoy was Dumbledore, his eyes trained on the back of Malfoy's head, cautiously awaiting even the slightest move for his wand. After the Headmaster came Ron and Hermione, both huddled together for comfort and support. They kept glancing back at Harry and Evans, who took up the rear. Other than Malfoy's soul piercing whistling, no one uttered a sound.

Harry kept his head down, controlling his anger. Hearing Malfoy only made him even more furious. What was he going to do? He didn't know how to fake answers under the truth serum, and he wasn't entirely sure why he should. He had no desire to save Hermione from the wrath of the school board since this was, in essence, her own fault. She had no right to start playing with magic that she hadn't researched extensively (which was weird, considering the Hermione of his own universe) and the fact that she blamed him for her screw up only made him less sympathetic to her plight.

She and Ron knew that what they were doing was wrong and they could finally see the consequences of their actions peeking at them through the shine of Dumbledore's spectacles. He seemed to have half guessed what was going on, especially by observing how Ron and Hermione exchanged looks every time mention of Harry acting differently came up. Most students had noticed the strange behavior Ron and Hermione had been exhibiting as of late. They hadn't, of course, attributed this behavior to Harry, but now that he could see the three alone, Dumbledore saw that perhaps he was right.

“Potter, remember that time in second year, everyone was convinced that you were the heir of Slytherin?” Malfoy suddenly said, too cheerfully. Ron and Hermione were the only ones who looked up at him but everyone else was obviously paying attention. Harry glared at him for a long time before he cleared his throat.

“What about it Malfoy? Were you jealous?” He sneered. Malfoy laughed.

“In truth? Yeah, a little. But then again, you thought I was the heir of Slytherin also, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I even snuck into your common room and convinced you that me and Ron were Crabbe and Goyle.” At this, Harry smirked wickedly. Malfoy stopped smiling and turned, his feet still moving as he stared at Harry for a long time before he threw his head back and laughed. The sound chilled Ron so deeply that he whimpered and grabbed onto Hermione’s arm. He had never shown this much cowardice in public before, but then again, Malfoy was completely insane. A blind man could tell that he was prepared to do absolutely anything to get what he wanted, including allowing himself to get killed.

“That was you and WEASLEY?” He snorted even harder at the image. Harry couldn’t help chuckling.

“You used to think you were so bad, stealing other people’s gifts right in front of us. You thought you were so tough just because you could talk big and your daddy had a big wallet.” Harry said amusedly, though he didn’t know himself why this was entertaining him so much. “But when in the face of danger, you were such a little pansy.”

“Well, some things never change Potter.” Malfoy said, twisting to smirk at him. There was a hint of fire in his eyes though, and a little too much of those sharp teeth in his smile. “But then again, some things always change.” The comment about him being a coward went ignored.

“Why are you doing this?” Harry said, after a long moment.

“Because you ruined my family, Potter. You sent my father to Azkaban.” Malfoy said, staring at him. Harry scowled darkly, though the familiar hate wasn’t there for some reason.

“He sent himself to Azkaban.”

“Just like your parents got themselves killed.”

“Yeah, they did.” At this declaration, Malfoy stopped in his track and turned around to fully face Harry, an awed look on his face. Ron and Hermione side stepped him and tried to keep the procession moving but they found that Snape and Dumbledore hadn't moved either. Harry stopped and stared at him, no emotion in his eyes.

“Will wonders never cease? I thought you would try to curse my brains out for even mentioning your parents in any way that wasn't glorifying their sorry arses.”

“Well, it is true, isn't it? My parents got themselves killed; your dad got himself caught. And we're in the middle of it because our parents were just too stupid to really see what they were getting themselves (and us) into. My parents fought for a noble cause, and I'm proud of them for that, but they were pretty thick to think they could kick a dragon while it was sleeping and not expect to be burnt alive. Your dad meddled in the Dark Arts and associated with Voldemort, playing as his handyman and his lapdog. He was bound to get caught in the act at one point or another; it was just plain luck he got away with it for so long.”

Malfoy continued to stare at him; he couldn't help but be intrigued that Harry could show so much depth and thought for such a long period of time without hurting his fragile ego-driven brain. Normally it was all “how dare you insult my parents!” or “at least my parents loved me!” or some other childish retort, but here he was reflecting on the state of the world and the mistakes their parents had made. He was, in fact, mirroring most of Malfoy's own thoughts on the matter, and yet it didn't seem to pain him to talk about it.

“Potter, stop being so perceptive.” Malfoy said at last, amused. “You just might wind up making sense.”

Harry rolled his eyes and walked ahead of Ron, Hermione, and Dumbledore, instead walking beside Malfoy. They continued on towards the dungeons in silence though Malfoy and Harry seemed to be exchanging powerful messages simply through eye contact.

Breaking the tension had relieved the entire group, though the threat of violence was still there, just waiting for one of them to set it off.

Dumbledore couldn't figure them out. First, Malfoy was showing signs of complete insanity and a taste for blood so strong that no other emotion or thought seemed to have room in his demonic mind. Instead, here he was having a pleasant, even insightful conversation with a young man he openly considered to be the worst enemy of his life. Worse still, Harry seemed completely calm and thoughtful in return. Were they friends and simply trying to trick him? Or were they truly enemies who'd had a bit too much destruction in their lives to bring it on senselessly? Was Malfoy perhaps completely insane? Was Harry perhaps completely insane?

Snape opened the door to one of the more advanced potion classrooms and locked the door once everyone was inside. He went to one of the cupboards and carefully took out a glass vial with a pearly-white liquid swirling inside, like cigarette smoke curling around everything it touched. Harry and Malfoy remained standing side by side though they didn't look at each other anymore. Both wore such serious expressions on their faces that Snape was almost afraid to go near them. They weren't gathering strength from each other, they were somehow letting their masks fall and show their true potential.

"Before we get started, is there anything in particular that you wish to say, of your own free will?" Dumbledore asked carefully. He could feel the power rolling off the two boys now, though he couldn't understand why. They had been perfectly normal in the corridor but now, so close to each other and trapped in this room, they seemed larger than life, waiting for anything and prepared for everything. Were they planning to attack? Were they planning to conspire and kill everyone in the room?

Ron audibly gulped and, when the silence became too thick and oppressive, clenched his eyes and finally spoke. "All I have to say is that this isn't my fault! I had nothing to do with it!" He cried.

“Ron, SHH!” Hermione hissed through the corner of her mouth, digging her heel into his foot. Ron yelped and tried to get away from her.

“It was all Hermione’s idea! I had nothing to do with it! She forced me into it! She forced me to keep my mouth shut!” He ran around the room, closely followed by a betrayed and vengeful Hermione. Harry and Malfoy blinked, simply watching them. Their power deflated slightly as they watched Hermione unsuccessfully try to kick him.

“That isn’t true Professor!” Hermione yelled quickly, trying to tackle Ron but instead almost crashing into a cauldron. “It was a mistake! It was an accident!”

“What happened?” Dumbledore asked calmly, turning his attention from Harry and Malfoy to Ron and Hermione instead. How were Ron and Hermione mixed up in all of this? Wasn’t Harry to blame for Malfoy’s erratic behavior? Was there something that these two seemingly innocent Gryffindors had done to start this chain of events that had started out with only a strangely behaved Harry?

At the sound of his voice, Ron and Hermione slowly stopped running and bowed their heads, not looking at him. They guiltily shuffled their shoes on the stone floor before Hermione finally opened her mouth. “We were doing a Charms extra credit project, together.” At this she glared at Ron. He didn’t bother to protest lest any of Dumbledore’s attention waver towards him. “And we accidentally used one that Professor Flitwick told us, later, was actually supposed to be in the Restricted Section. It was meant for summoning. And you see, we had meant to summon something very simple but instead we... um, that is to say... we summoned something a little... um, more...”

“Alive.” Harry said at last when she showed no signs of continuing. She winced at the sound of his voice and finally nodded.

“We summoned Harry Potter, but not the one from this universe. He’s from another universe, an alternate one where...”

“He’s the Boy Who Lived!” Ron blurted out, lifting his head pleadingly. “I wanted to tell you but Hermione said we would get sent to Azkaban for using a restricted charm and so we kept it quiet and since the real Harry Potter hasn’t been here for months, we thought it was okay!” Harry narrowed his eyes. Of course they didn’t know that the real Harry Potter had been killed a long time ago.

Dumbledore paled and simply stared at them. “... You mean to say that you summoned a being that could have very easily been a more gruesome, more powerful Lord Voldemort or worse, into this castle and you did not think it important enough to inform me of it? Not only that but his living counter part has not returned to the castle and could potentially be dead, and yet you didn’t think to worry yourselves that, perhaps, he is dead right now?”

Understanding slowly dawned on Hermione’s face and she began to cry. Malfoy couldn’t help but smirk. “Great going there Granger. Really, I’ve never seen you do anything more stupid than this. Than again, the Hermione of our world would have gone running to Dumbledore the second something bad happened.”

“Please professor, I wanted to tell you!” Ron pleaded.

“If you had the courage to see the grave error you had committed, you would have told me whether she had cursed you to silence forever or not.” Dumbledore said harshly. Malfoy giggled to himself, greatly enjoying watching the Mudblood and the Weasel finally get yelled at for always getting away with everything.

“Immediate expulsion is in order.” Snape said quietly. Dumbledore rubbed his temples.

“I’m afraid that unless the Harry Potter of this world comes forward soon, Azkaban may be the better punishment.” Ron and Hermione sucked in their breaths at the mention of Azkaban actually being an option.

“That’s unfortunate since the Harry Potter of the universe is dead.” Harry said calmly. Hermione sobbed at this and Ron turned so white,

he almost fainted on the spot. "Because I am, technically, him, I felt his spirit when he was dead. I saw who killed him." At this, Harry slowly clenched his fists. "Peter Pettigrew."

"Ironical, isn't it Potter?" Malfoy said amusedly as everyone else sucked in their breath. "The man who ends up getting your parents killed also becomes the one who kills you here?"

"Yes well, I'm glad Pettigrew finally got some balls and did something for himself." Harry said calmly. Why should he be upset? He had been angry for months on end but now, here, why be upset about something that didn't even happen to him? Yes, he hated Pettigrew, but Harry's anger would be put to better use killing him rather than spitting on his name. "That and I'm something of a weakling in this universe so I don't feel half as bad if he had actually killed me."

"Are you sure that he's dead?" Dumbledore asked, pain filling his voice.

"Yes, I'm very sure. Pettigrew burned his body, or at least that's what I think happened. He's been dead since a month after school started." Ron and Hermione trembled at the thought that a classmate was dead and had been dead for so long. He had gone completely unnoticed because of something they had refused to confess to.

"The children couldn't have known what they were doing." Snape said after a long pause. Torturing the students was all fun and good, but expelling two students who obviously didn't know what they were doing and were too dense to mean any harm wasn't going to help anyone, nor was it going to bring back a dead student. The thought that Harry Potter was actually dead still caused a strange sensation in Snape. On one hand, he could silently rejoice in the torture that James Potter would feel knowing that his son had been killed. On the other hand, though, a student had been killed while under the protection of Hogwarts. That in itself were grounds for the Ministry of Magic to come in and take over the school, send the students home into possibly more danger and leave everyone in a vulnerable state, ripe for the Dark Lord to come in and take over.

“You know as well as I do that the students didn’t see any harm in what they were doing, but in the end a student was murdered, and I assume he was murdered on school grounds. We cannot allow such disregard for the lives of others to go unpunished.”

“I agree that punishment is in order but sending them to Azkaban could potentially do more bad than good.” Snape countered. The more he thought about it, the more he knew that the two Gryffindors would not survive longer than a week in Azkaban. Hermione was still crying softly beside Ron.

“Punishment shouldn’t be your main concern right now.” Harry said before Dumbledore could reply. “There is someone far more dangerous than Pettigrew running around.”

“I understand your concern for Sirius Black and your parents, Harry, but I assure you that you are safe behind these walls.” Dumbledore said, not ready to drop the subject on Ron and Hermione’s punishment. Malfoy started laughing, however, and this instantly made Dumbledore pay more attention to them.

“You honestly think Potter should be scared of his parents? Have you not heard what the Weasel said? He’s the Boy Who Bloody Lived! What do you think he’s famous for, eating more potatoes than anyone in Hogwarts?” Malfoy smirked wickedly.

“Malfoy, could you stop being an arse for five seconds?” Harry sighed, rubbing his temples. “What he means is that Voldemort is here. That is to say, the Voldemort of our universe. And trust me, this one’s much worse than the pansy you guys have got around here. From what I’ve read of him in the papers and in the old copies of the Prophet in the library, he’s a kitten compared to what he’s done in our universe.” A shiver went up Snape’s spine as he listened to Harry speak so condescendingly of the most feared Dark Lord to ever live. Someone was actually worse than the Dark Lord he knew? Merlin save them.

“How do you know he’s here?” Dumbledore asked, deathly quiet.

“Because I helped him get here.” Malfoy purred, rocking on his heels. “You see, he and Potter have a very... intimate relationship. When someone’s escaped death more than five times, of course he starts to get frustrated. When said person suddenly vanishes, it’s only proper to go after him and finish the job properly.”

“As if he has nothing better to do.” Harry growled to himself. “Anyway, if he’s here and he hasn’t attacked us yet, that must mean he’s planning something. And Malfoy here might now so I suggest you interrogate him.” Harry growled, glaring at Malfoy.

Malfoy threw his head back and laughed. “The minute I got here, the Dark Lord excluded me from his plans for this very reason. I was more than happy to let him go on and make his plans without me since I would be doing a far more important job.” He purred again. “And that was, of course, letting him into your mind Potter. Honestly, maybe you should have practiced harder while you were still at Hogwarts. Maybe your darling godfather would still be alive.”

“Maybe if you weren’t such a coward and went yourself, your father wouldn’t have been caught in the Department of Mysteries.” Harry coolly replied. Malfoy snickered but his eyes narrowed dangerously. The tension in the room was building again and the two looked close to violence, though their hands were still loosely resting against their thighs. They physically showed no indication of hitting the other but their voices were coated in steel, just waiting for the right opportunity.

“Enough,” Dumbledore growled, looking impatient at last, “Mr. Malfoy, is the school in any immediate danger?”

“I wouldn’t know, and if I did, it wouldn’t help if I told you.” Malfoy said, his eyes dancing.

Snape suddenly went to the door and left, locking it behind him. Evans looked after him but frowned and didn’t go after him. Instead, he moved closer to Malfoy and Harry, watching them carefully. He wasn’t sure where the Potions Master had gone, but he had a pretty

good idea. He wouldn't say anything of course, but he couldn't allow anyone to see he knew either.

Ron and Hermione exchanged weak glances and sank into two stools reserved for the students. They were both trying to find a way, any way that they could somehow get out of this punishment. Ron had considered expulsion to be the absolute worst punishment that could result from not telling Dumbledore about Harry, but Azkaban now seemed to be the only option they had. And that, in itself, was terribly bleak. He knew about Azkaban, he had even seen it once before. He had never gone in of course, but you don't have to go in to hear the screams coming from the belly of Hell. Hermione was a bit luckier, or perhaps worse off; because she was a Muggle, she had no idea what it really meant to be sent to Azkaban. Sure, she had read about it, but no one could possibly imagine, not really know what it would be like to be sent there. The dementors on the school grounds gave the students a taste of it, but no one could possibly know what it was like to be surrounded by them, day after day, for eternity.

There were scuffling sounds outside the door and then a loud thump. Dumbledore frowned and started towards the door but appeared to be even angrier when he found the door locked magically as well as physically. Taking out his wand, he whispered some words to the lock and the door flew open. On the floor was James Potter, white as a ghost and unconscious. Over him was Lily Potter, worriedly petting his face and trying to wake him. Sirius Black and Snape were grappling with each other nearby

Chapter Thirty: Reunion of Lonely Souls

Sirius and James had an easier time walking under the Invisibility Cloak than Lily did, simply because of their experiences with it. Lily found herself tripping over her own feet or making too much noise when she walked, but eventually she got the hang of it. Their two guides, true to their words, showed admirable restraint and craftiness, purposefully walking a bit harder than they normally would to cover any sounds the people behind them could make and smiling widely to all the people who greeted them.

The very idea of this being a trap slowly left their minds, however, when the two students didn't so much as wince when they saw the Minister of Magic. They treated him with cold formality when they passed him, undoubtedly on his way to the Three Broomsticks to soothe the local people by being out and about in the city where dementors walked "for their own protection." As soon as they were able to sneak into Honeydukes, James pulled off the Invisibility Cloak from around their shoulders and followed Hermione as she walked down the dark corridor with her wand lit. She and Ron didn't appear to be at all afraid with having three known fugitives behind them.

Soon, after endless walking, Lily finally broke the silence. "Why are you helping us?" Everyone jumped at the sudden sound. Everyone, it seemed, was highly alert and tense. Her spoken word has broken that tension.

"Harry is... our best friend." Hermione said evasively. "We were with him in school when he was in danger."

"We helped him out of a lot of scraps." Ron added, slowly relaxing again. "He's like a brother to us."

"How did you meet him?" Lily asked, awed by any talk that concerned Harry.

"My family was getting ready to go through the barrier to get on the train when we met him." Ron said, smiling faintly. "He was a lot thinner and scrawnier back then, but he grew up since then. He was

raised in the Muggle world by his aunt and uncle so he had no idea that magic even existed until his eleventh birthday when Hagrid went and told him that you and Mr. Potter hadn't died in a car accident but that Voldemort had killed you. He approached my family because he heard us talking about Muggles I expect, or because we had owls and trunks just like he did. He's got an owl, Hedwig. She's missed him terrible since he was gone but when Remus explained it all to her, she calmed down and started eating again."

"What house is he in?" Sirius asked, looking hopeful now as well. He had been deprived of any information about his godson for so many years, now this well of knowledge had just appeared to them. He was going to pump him for information for as long as he could.

"Well, I have no idea what house he's in here, but back home, he was in Gryffindor with Hermione and me. He was Seeker for our Quidditch team too, since his first year."

"First years can't be on the Quidditch team." James said automatically. Hermione giggled slightly to herself as Ron smirked.

"Yes well, Harry didn't get on the Quidditch team the normal way. Professor McGonagall caught him trying to save our friend's Remembrall from a Slytherin who was in our class. Long story short, he was so good that McGonagall practically threatened him if he didn't get on the team. He even took the captain out of class just to introduce them."

"Oh, Wood was in love with Harry." Hermione said, waving her hand. "He'd come in while we were studying for finals and he'd drag Harry off to go over some play or other. Not that Harry needed it of course, he was a natural at flying."

"It even helped him pass the first Task of the TriWizard tournament."

"What?" Lily, James, and Sirius all said at once. Hermione and Ron blushed.

“Oh, sorry about that.” Ron said, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s so easy to get carried away talking about all the dangerous stuff Harry got involved with. It’s not that he tried to get in trouble or into these messes; trouble has always followed him around, ever since I first met him.”

“Harry’s one of the sweetest people I know.” Hermione said fiercely. “He would never hurt a soul if he could help it. All he does is help people and put himself in danger, that’s all he ever does.”

“Sounds like someone I know.” Sirius said softly, grinning at James. James couldn’t help grinning widely.

“Well, a lot of people have always gone on about how Harry looks just like his dad but has his mother’s eyes.” Hermione said. “And I think he liked it at first, but it got to be... a strain last year.” She looked nervously at Ron. “He... didn’t take it as a compliment anymore. People started using it as an excuse to make him a martyr, or to treat him like nothing more than the Boy Who Lived. No one really let him have a normal life ever since he was brought to Hogwarts.”

“Harry never liked the fame,” Ron said, eyes narrowed protectively. “I used to be jealous of him for a long time, but then I started to see what it was doing to him. It was awful. Whenever he showed even a remote interest in any girl, the tabloids would instantly say he was in love. They thought he was in love with Hermione for a long time.”

“He never was.” Hermione growled angrily. “And of course, since I was dating someone else at the time, they made me out to look like a slut leading him on. Harry just laughed about it at first, but then he got really mad that they were smearing my good name all over the papers. He got really mad when people approached him about that kind of stuff too. Even teachers treated him differently because of it.”

“Some good, and some very very bad.” Ron said, eyes darkening. “Snape made Harry’s life a living hell. He treated Harry worse than absolutely anyone, just because of the way Harry’s dad treated him in school, and how he saved Snape’s life.” At this, Ron looked up at

James. "Oh Merlin I'm... I'm sorry. We're just so used to talking about you and... and Mrs. Potter in the past tense."

"It must be strange, talking to dead people." Lily said quietly. James shuddered at the idea and hugged Lily tighter to his side.

"Well, it's weirder talking to Sirius." Hermione said carefully. "Since we actually met him in our universe." Sirius perked up at the mention of his name.

"You met me? What was I like?" Ron and Hermione shifted uncomfortably.

"When we first met, you had just escaped Azkaban also, only you had done it in our third year instead of right now in our sixth year. Harry was... lied to and convinced you had been the one to kill Lily and James Potter-,"

"WHAT!" The echo resounded piercingly through the darkness. Ron winced slightly.

"Pettigrew set it up to look like you had betrayed the location of the Potters to Voldemort. After you were murdered, Sirius looked for Pettigrew and figured out they had been tricked. When he went after him, Pettigrew staged his own death and murdered 13 other people and transformed into a rat. He lived as a rat until our third year." Ron explained.

Sirius just stared at them before he slowly began to chuckle, then to laugh uproariously. James had a similar reaction.

"PETTIGREW did that? No way he was clever enough to dupe us like that!"

"Well he did." Hermione said calmly. "That's the only reason Harry managed to trust you. Unfortunately, when we caught Pettigrew, it was also a full moon. Remus was with us and he hadn't taken the Wolfsbane potion so you can imagine the kind of mess that followed.

Luckily, no one was bitten and we managed to help Sirius escape before the dementors administered the Kiss.”

“How did you manage that?”

“Well,” at this Hermione paused since they had reached the end of the tunnel. She grinned widely. “How about I let Harry tell you all about it?” Ron helped her up through the witch’s hump and they all crawled out into the Hogwarts corridor. Looking around, Hermione carefully took out a crinkled piece of paper and whispered something to it, making all of Hogwarts appear.

“The Marauder’s Map.” Sirius breathed. “I haven’t seen that in years.”

“It’s Harry’s.” Ron explained quietly, looking at the map. “Harry’s in the dungeons with... what the... Malfoy? How’s that possible when he’s... right... here.” Ron slowly pointed to another, identical dot in the Slytherin Common Room. “Oh no... he got into the castle!”

“I thought he’d stay glued to Voldemort.” Hermione whispered. “After all, he was the one who found Harry’s soul traces leading to this universe to begin with. Otherwise we would have spent years looking for him.”

Lily looked over their shoulders, staring at the plain little black dot in the dungeons. A name was scrawled in beautiful cursive: Harry James Potter. Her little baby was... so close. She could walk for fifteen minutes and see him. She could almost touch him. As she shivered, James looked at her and hugged her tightly to him. He knew that look, that desperate, worried look Lily got when she was willing to risk her life to get something, specifically Harry. “Be patient love.” He whispered in her ear.

“Mmm.” Lily said distractedly but she relaxed.

“Let’s go. Get the cloak on!” Hermione said, starting towards the dungeons after stuffing the map back into her pocket. She made sure the others were wearing the Invisibility Cloak before they proceeded

to look for the dungeon that contained Harry. As they went, Lily continued having a bit of trouble walking though she was far more careful than she had been before.

Just as they were reaching the door, the handle was wrenched away as a man came out of the room and closed the door behind him, locking it. Snape froze when he recognized Ron and Hermione, narrowing his eyes to dangerous points as he stared at them.

“What is this? Is this your idea of a joke?” He growled. Ron and Hermione, not having expected this, stared up at him like helpless deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck.

“I... I...” Hermione tried, unsuccessfully to speak. Sirius and James stiffened at the sight of Snape, though Lily was the one who carefully took the stolen wand the three of them had used since escaping Azkaban and prepared to curse her once-friend if he discovered them.

“You had better take that disguise spell off this second.” He hissed angrily. Ron and Hermione shut their mouths and stared at each other. This... hadn’t been what they had expected.

“Pardon...?” Hermione tried.

“I have Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger in my office right now. Do you honestly believe you can trick me into thinking that you two are them again, just so you can sneak into my classrooms and ruin perfectly good potions, just so that I will take more points off of Gryffindor? Take those disguises off at once. Twenty points from Slytherin! Take... off... those... disguises! NOW!”

Ron and Hermione were so relieved, confused, and appalled that they didn’t quite know what to do. They opened their mouths to speak but then, without really meaning to, Ron began to laugh. Hermione stared at him in horror though she couldn’t wipe off a nervous smile. She stepped on his foot but that only made him laugh harder. Snape gave him a death glare for laughing at him.

“Forty points from Slytherin, for each of you.” He growled. Ron only laughed harder at this, doubling over. Hermione pushed him weakly and tried to give Snape an innocent, apologetic look but she couldn’t quite manage it.

“P-Professor... I’m... s-sorry... oh Merlin...” Ron managed to choke out before dissolving into shouts of laughter again.

“That’s enough!” Snape threw his hands back in outrage, hands clenched. It was unfortunate that Ron hadn’t stopped laughing. It was unfortunate that Hermione couldn’t explain why they were in two places at once. It was unfortunate that Lily hadn’t seen the two little dots next to Harry’s name that read “Ronald Weasley” and “Hermione Granger.” It was unfortunate that Sirius had purposefully dragged the little group closer so that he could trip Snape whenever he decided to walk away. It was unfortunate that Lily was clinging to James so tightly that his arms were locked at his sides. It was, perhaps, most unfortunate that James Potter happened to be in the direct path of Snape’s right fist.

James fell down hard, bashing his head against the stone floor as he fell. He was instantly knocked out and he rolled over, barely breathing. Lily whimpered when she felt the Invisibility Cloak slide off her body and pool at Sirius’s feet, both slowly turning to stare dumbly at James, who’s feet were half invisible as a result of the cloak lying on his legs.

Sirius growled and leapt forward, tackling Snape to the ground, never mind he knew that Snape couldn’t possibly have meant to hit James. Lily knelt by her husband, desperately trying to wake him without disturbing the small cut on his forehead. Ron and Hermione yelped and tried to get Sirius off of Snape but, when they heard the doorknob rattle, they leapt back into the shadows of the corridor as the door was blown off and a very angry Dumbledore stepped into the hallway.

Everyone froze and simply stared at everyone else. A black-haired head poked out of the room and looked around, instantly paling at the sight of Sirius.

“HARRY!” Hermione screamed and leapt at her best friend. Harry jumped at the sound of his own name and almost managed to get away before Hermione attached herself to him. Ron followed suit and attacked his friend, giving him a tight bear hug. “We were so worried!”

Snape, bloody lip and bruised eye, stared in astonishment at who he thought had been Blaise Zabini and possibly Pansy Parkinson. No... it couldn't be...

Harry slowly realized who was hugging him. What was more, he could almost sense that they were his best friends, his real best friends. He hugged them back as tightly as he could, feeling something tight, tense, ugly, slowly unwind in his body and let him fully relax. Hermione laughed weakly and cried into his chest as Ron dutifully half-hugged him, trying not to let any tears enter his voice.

“We missed you, mate.”

“I missed you guys too.” Harry whispered, grinning broadly at them. Malfoy remained in the dungeons, not bothering to welcome the late arrivals. Let them have their sappy, weepy moment, for now. This only served to give him more time to think of a way to properly execute his plans.

“I assume these are... other counterparts from your universe?” Dumbledore asked quietly. Harry nodded and grinned.

“They're my best mates.” He looked back at them, smiling widely. “How have you guys been?”

“Awful,” Ron said earnestly, “but we didn't come here to chat. We...” At this he paused and glanced back at James on the floor and Sirius still with his fist raised to punch Snape. “Erm, you caught them at a bad time but... well, there's your mum over there. Snape just knocked out your dad, by accident strangely enough. And Sirius, as you know, is over there.”

Harry stiffened at the mention of his parents and stared at Lily. Lily stared right back at him, her eyes filling with tears. She wanted to

stand and run to him, to hold him in her arms and never, ever let him go again. She didn't have the strength, however, to do anything but smile crookedly and wave to him. Harry, knowing how stupid he must look, waved back at her though his feet stayed firmly planted where they were.

Slowly, he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Mum?" Lily melted, just at that one word. She began to sob hysterically though she tried her best not to leak so embarrassingly in front of her son.

"Oh Merlin, Harry... my little boy." The voice. Harry sucked in a deep breath and let her voice surround him. He had only ever heard that voice three times: once, when dementors were close by; a second time, when his wand and Voldemort's had fused; the last time, when Harry had seen his fifteen year old mother in Snape's worst memory.

"I..." Harry paused, struggling for something to say. "Why's dad unconscious?"

Lily laughed, wiping her tears away desperately. "He got hit... by accident. I believe your friend said that."

"Oh." Harry paused and shifted from foot to foot, staring down at the floor. "Um... how are you?" Lily stared at him. Was it really going to be all small talk now that they were together? Was it that he wanted to keep her at arm's length or was he, maybe, scared to talk about what was really important to him right now?

She pushed herself to stand, trembling slightly as she released James's hand and let it slide to the floor. She slowly, purposefully, walked towards Harry, keeping her eyes squarely on his. Harry's eyebrows shot up and he almost took a step back but she was already there. Her arms were around him. All he could see was her long red hair and all he could feel were her warm, powerful arms around his shoulders, hugging him protectively. A surge of emotion exploded up Harry's spine, choking his throat so that nothing could come out. He couldn't even breathe let alone speak.

Finally, he sobbed and threw his arms around her, hugging her as tightly as he could. She was real. She smelled alive, not like angels or dust or roses or any of that other made up garbage that angels and spirits and mothers were supposedly to smell like. She smelled like sweat, and tears, and she had a real smell. He drank it in hungrily, burying his face in her neck. Someone tried to pull him away from her but he screamed, releasing a surge of magic that threw everyone around him back three feet. He clung to Lily with all of his might, crying desperately.

Lily didn't know what to feel. She was ecstatic and delighted and regretful and euphoric and... none of those words could truly express the deep, encompassing pressure of emotion that was coursing through her veins. She wanted to say things to him, all the things a mother should say to her baby. She wanted to say that she loved him, that she had ached to hold him and make sure he was okay, that she would have crawled through Hell on her belly if only to see him once more. That she loved him. That she had never wanted to let him go, that she would never let him go again. But somehow, he already knew. She didn't have to do anything but hold him, and cry with him.

Sirius slowly released Snape, just watching them. Of course he had missed Harry, he was his godfather of course, but nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to the love a mother had for her child, and a child for his mother. They were both crying and hugging each other, and nothing else. That seemed to be enough for now, maybe enough for always. Somehow, all the pain they had gone through seemed worth it. All that had happened to them since the day they had left Hogwarts was all worth it.

The blood and pain and sweat and the struggling, it was all worth it, because Harry was worth it.

Chapter Thirty One: Revelations

Sirius sat cross-legged on the bed opposite James, fiddling with his best friend's glasses. It had been two hours since the 'Snape' incident as Sirius had come to think of it. At the moment, the greasy Potions master was in Dumbledore's office along with Harry, that strange blond psychopath and those two other teenagers, Hermione and Ron. Lily was lying beside James in his bed, gently petting his arm. Her emerald eyes were distant, perhaps watching her son in better days. She was so caught up in her own thoughts that she didn't react when James groaned and stirred.

Sirius stiffened and leaned closer but James merely turned his head and continued sleeping. He hadn't woken up yet and Sirius was really starting to worry about his best friend. He frowned and sat back on his bed and continued to play with James's glasses. He was still trying to understand exactly what had happened back in the dungeons. He could remember Snape hitting James, attacking Snape, getting in a couple good punches before something distracted him, Harry...

Just thinking about his godson made Sirius sit still for a moment.

He could remember Dumbledore gently trying to separate Lily and Harry after they had started hugging. Harry had shown temper and quite a hefty bit of magic, throwing everyone around him back. He had not wanted to release his mother and Lily hadn't exactly been helpful in that area. And so the Headmaster had temporarily backed off, not that anyone really noticed. The blond had tried to escape then but Snape had actually been useful for once and stopped the brat before he got too far.

After a few gentle words, Dumbledore had managed to pry the two apart and taken Snape, Harry, Harry's two friends, Hermione and Ron, and a strange blond haired young man with him up to his office. Sirius scowled slightly just remembering how Lily had calmed down only when she was able to lie in the hospital wing beside James. She had been silent since then, eyes glazed, occasionally smiling to herself about some mental picture she had conjured, possibly of Harry.

He still wasn't sure what Dumbledore had told Madame Pomphrey to let them stay but whatever it was, he was truly grateful to the headmaster. The three of them could use the chance to rest and think, though only James seemed capable of sleep. Lily and Sirius were just too awake to even attempt slumber.

"Sirius, thinking doesn't suit you." James groaned as he slowly turned his head, opening his eyes. Sirius jumped and hurried to lean towards the Potters as James managed to sit up. Lily buried her face in his chest, hugging him with rail-thin arms. James smiled down at her red hair and kissed the top of her head before looking at Sirius. "So, what'd I miss?"

"Snape knocked you out." Sirius said bluntly, giving him a teasing smirk. "I punched him back for you." James laughed and shook his head, still smiling down at Lily. "And we saw Harry."

In that instant, James whirled and grabbed Sirius's arm, nearly falling off the bed. His eyes went very wide and he shook as if he had suddenly been possessed by a cold.

"You saw Harry?" He whispered, almost as if he didn't quite believe it. "What did he look like? Was he okay? Did you find out anything about him? Where is he?" He started looking around the hospital wing wildly, desperate to see his son.

"He's with Dumbledore right now." Lily said softly, looking up from his robes. Her smile made James pause and simply stare at her for a long moment. She hadn't smiled like that in such a long time. "He looks just like you, James. He's beautiful." She said, shaking her head weakly. "He's so strong. James, I wish you had seen him!" James's face filled with longing.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go see him right now!" James tried to stand but Sirius put a restraining hand on his arm. "What is it now?" James snapped, eyes narrowed. Why is it that everyone, even his best friend and wife, were trying to keep him away from Harry?

“Dumbledore asked us to stay here. He said he had something really important to discuss with Harry and his friends. I don’t really understand everything they were talking about but it seems that those kids were right about being from another universe.”

“What does it matter? I want to see Harry!” Lily placed a gentle, restraining hand on her husband. James turned to her, trembling with suppressed emotions. When he turned to look at Sirius, he finally began to relax and take a deep breath.

“James, sweet heart, we have to let things play out. You haven’t thought about what this means, have you?” Both Sirius and James took in a careful breath. They knew that tone of voice, they knew what the crease between Lily’s eyebrows meant. They knew that what she was about to say was going to be terribly unpleasant. “Those two students who brought us in here, they were here to find Harry, correct? And they are from another universe. It stands to reason that Harry is also from-,”

“Don’t,” James whispered, his eyes closed. He was breathing hard, clenching his jaw. Lily could actually hear his teeth grinding together. “Don’t finish that sentence. Just don’t. Please.” He whispered the last word, shoulders trembling.

“James...” Lily buried her face in his shoulder, hugging him loosely around the waist. She didn’t want to say it, but she had to. They couldn’t lie to each other. They needed to get this out in the open before the headmaster could come and confirm their findings.

“It makes sense.” Sirius said very quietly. Both of his friends turned to look at him. Sirius had a very strange smile on his face. His eyes though, those were the most frightening. They were hollow, bleak, nearly at the point of hysteria. “We break out to find Harry only to find out he’s dead. And then we have some replacement from another world come along to mock us and who will be snatched away the second we start to love him.” James started shaking.

“Enough.” Lily said firmly. Both men turned to stare at her in surprise. Ever since they had escaped Azkaban, Lily had been such a

fragile, frail woman. They had thought the wind could tip her over if they weren't careful. And now, here was the old Lily. Here was her powerful voice, her firm resolve, her authoritative manner that made everyone stop and listen to her. "We are not going to lose Harry so long as we draw breath. We're going to find him and we're going to keep him. Now stop acting like children."

"Yes ma'am." Sirius said softly. Lily reached out and hugged him for a second before pulling back to rest against James again.

"That's all we can do for now. If we only get to know Harry for a little while, that's better than never having known him at all. Besides," her voice trembled now, "just because he's here it doesn't mean that our Harry is dead. Those students who helped us in, they didn't want to be seen. I suspect they have counterparts too, and if they were hiding that must mean that their counterparts are alive. Right? That means that our Harry isn't necessarily dead."

"Of course." James said very softly, petting his wife's back. Sirius clenched his jaw and shifted slightly. "So, does that mean we can sneak out and look for Harry now?"

"No, that means we are going to sit here and we're going to wait for Dumbledore to come back and tell us what's going on. And we're not going to get in the way because that could mean getting Harry in trouble. So, we're going to wait, and we're not going to get ourselves in danger and possibly hurt him."

"Right." James said after a long moment.

"Right." Sirius said reluctantly. The three of them looked at each other for a long moment.

"Oh fine!" Lily finally hissed, glaring at them. "But if we get caught, I'm going to kill both of you!" James and Sirius grinned wickedly at her and leapt to their feet (though James winced slightly and touched his temple as the blood rushed up to his head) and both motioned for Lily to go with them. Lily rolled her eyes and stood, preparing to possibly get herself into more trouble than she was willing to get into.

Harry sat back, staring up quietly at the portrait above Dumbledore's head. Professor Dippet, Headmaster before Dumbledore, was looking curiously down his long nose at all of the students and the lone teacher seated across from Dumbledore. The portraits chattered very quietly to each other, amazed by the striking differences in students that they had come to watch over. There was the girl, Hermione Granger, who was markedly intelligent, especially when placed besides other students such as those around her (Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley). And yet, there was always something about the curiosity in Ms. Granger's persona that made her seem a little... self-centered would be a polite way of putting it.

They had watched her continuously embarrass the rest of the class by being able to answer the most difficult and complex problems that the professors could come up with, and she would only offer her tutoring services as a means of looking even better to the professors. Her thirst for knowledge was selfish and she had always had a bit of an agenda whenever she helped anyone, especially young Harry Potter, who, up until that year, had been abysmal about nearly everything. And yet... this Hermione Granger wasn't noticeably different. Had the girl really hidden her true nature so well? She was... concerned now. She was holding onto Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter's hands, tightening her grip in such a reassuring way, followed by such a sweet smile that the portraits began to wonder if someone had jinxed her somehow.

It wasn't that Hermione Granger was by any means a cruel girl, nor that she couldn't feel genuine emotions, nor give comfort, it was just that the different was so subtle, so very small, that all of the portraits noticed it immediately. She had a determined expression on her face, as if she was preparing herself for some sort of mental battle that she didn't know if she could win. Her reservations were something that the portraits had never seen before. Hermione Granger had always been quick to point the finger at a cheater in class or to speak out to the teachers when something was amiss, but this Hermione Granger looked ready to, heavens forbid, fight the Headmaster.

The other oddity of the group was Ronald Weasley. He was most likely the tallest of the Weasley children and, the portraits were

sheepish to admit, something of a shadow. Not many knew of the young man because he simply did not make such a lasting impression as, for example, his twin brothers Fred and George made, or the impression young Percy, Head boy of his time, had made. He did not break school rules and he did not follow them rigorously either. He didn't shine in his classes but neither was he the bottom of the class. He was, in essence, ordinary. And yet right now, he was radiating bravery. He had his eyes set firmly, with absolute conviction, on the Headmaster. His hands were tightly clenched (how Ms. Granger didn't wince, the portraits didn't know) and he seemed to be even taller, even in his chair. He had the air of someone who was ready to lay his life down, because he could and because he was ready to.

They had watched young Mr. Weasley a few times, mostly when no other interesting students were walking past, and yet at this moment, he was one of the most intense people in the room. He wasn't backing down from Dumbledore's stare, he was sitting up straight and not slouched as they so often saw him, and the look on his face was enough to make the portraits wonder what had happened to him that made him so very different.

Then there was Mr. Draco Malfoy.

The portraits sank back just a little in their frames, eyes glued to the back of the young man's head. His normally sleeked-back hair was disheveled, but not in a bad way. At least, the hair alone wasn't what bothered the portraits. His silver-blue eyes were the most frightening aspect of his appearance. He held himself in the same, arrogant fashion he always had ever since his first day at Hogwarts, but there was something else to the arrogance now, a strange new sort of pride that radiated off of him in a similar way that pride rolled off of Lucius Malfoy in waves.

This boy-, no, this young man, he had the look of a man who had been dragged to the edge of sanity, and leapt off. He seemed to find the oddest things funny, smirking as if to no one, being so rude as to prop his feet up on Dumbledore's desk until Professor Snape pushed them roughly off. Mr. Malfoy had only smirked up at him as if he knew some deep, dark secret about the professor that no one else did. He

was more... intense than the Draco Malfoy they had grown accustomed to. He was far more dangerous.

And then, last but not least, was the young man that was the most different than the student they had seen grow up. Harry Potter.

The boy was sitting up completely straight, back arched just a little, chin lifted defiantly and green eyes flashing with intelligence and cunning. He was markedly different than the sheepish, sniveling boy who's adolescence they had all witnessed. His very presence commanded attention nearly more than Dumbledore's did and he kept his firm, unwavering stare on the Headmaster in such a way that even Mr. Weasley beside him couldn't quite pull off.

The four together, so very different, had a strange new intensity the portraits had never seen in any student. They were more real and more powerful than seemed possible.

All of this from a simple glance.

"I am sure you know why I asked for you to come here with me." Dumbledore began quietly once everyone had settled into their chairs and began growing uncomfortable with the long silence. Professor Snape was standing behind the four chairs of the students, his eyes lingering on Malfoy's head. He knew that of all the students, he had the most to fear from the most unpredictable of them. Since Malfoy was insane and showed obvious signs of wishing to hurt others, Snape had determined that watching him was marginally safer than watching Harry.

"I admit that I have not been paying as careful attention to my students as I ought to." Dumbledore continued when no one spoke. Harry and Malfoy snorted at the same time and then glared at each other. "Yes, I see that I made a grave mistake in that, though I would like to rectify this mistake. Please explain to me how you all came to be here, as I now see that you are not of this world."

"Universe." Hermione corrected quietly. Ron smirked. "We, that is to say that the four of us, are from an alternate universe, transported

here through the use of the Vocare Prabia charm for summoning lost things. The spell book is in the restricted section in our school. When Harry was summoned from our universe by its use, it was only a matter of time before we were able to find our own way to follow him."

"You mean riding on my robe tails." Malfoy sneered. Hermione glared at him sharply but the Slytherin didn't react. "The Dark Lord was furious when his darling little Potter disappeared off the face of the planet. He searched and searched and oh, he was quite angry, Potter. It was delightful." Malfoy purred.

"Malfoy, if you don't have anything constructive to say, please know that I am prepared to jam my wand up your-,"

"Mr. Weasley." With a look, Dumbledore silenced Ron. Ron, however, did glare at the Headmaster. "Please, continue Mr. Malfoy."

"Why, thank you kindly, Headmaster." Malfoy said with an unpleasant glint in his eyes though he didn't smile. "The Dark Lord soon discovered through his connection to Potter that he could follow him into this nice, defenseless little universe. After all, with Longbottom as the Boy Who Lived here, what possible threat to his reign could there be?" Malfoy rolled his eyes. "To get here, he needed a loyal servant to come with him." His smirk grew. "And that would be me. I was younger than the other Death Eaters and the potential in me was far stronger than the already-molded magics of the others. And so," at this he grinned, "I came to be here."

"It really is too bad your father was sent to Azkaban, wasn't it, Malfoy?" Harry said quietly, in a dangerous tone. Malfoy stopped grinning and stared at his enemy. He began to reach for his wand but stopped before even Snape could come near him and only smirked.

"At least my father is still alive."

"You son of a-," Ron began to rise, jerking his wand much faster than Dumbledore had anticipated out of his robes. Hermione jerked him sharply down into his seat, her eyes cold.

“He’s not worth it, Ron.”

“We could curse him into oblivion and the Ministry couldn’t do anything.” Ron grumbled.

“It doesn’t matter.” Hermione said firmly. “Besides, he’s bloody insane. What could you possibly do to him that he hasn’t already done to himself?” Malfoy threw his head back and laughed, high and cold. His eyes slowly lowered, staring at Hermione with a strange sort of glee.

“Ah Mudblood, you always know just what to say to leash in poor little Weasel. I don’t know where he’d be without your insistent prattle in his ear. Does it get annoying, Weasel? Listening over and over to a Mudblood?” He sneered. “You’re a sorry excuse for a pureblood.”

“Not that it matters,” Harry said calmly, “but Voldemort himself is a half blood. Go figure.” Malfoy glared at him once again and Ron opened his mouth but Dumbledore cleared his throat loudly.

“Is there some way for you to be returned to your universe?” He asked very calmly.

“Yes, Ron and I know the way how.” Hermione said calmly. “The problem, however, is that Voldemort is here as well. That is to say, the Voldemort of our universe.”

“The bloke knows how to make things more complicated.” Ron said dryly. “But then again, he always has for us, right Harry?” Harry and Ron grinned at each other.

“How do you intend to go about removing him? Or will he follow you once you have left?” Dumbledore looked carefully at them. He had so many things to think about. The implications of having someone as strong as Harry undeniably was, having this swell of information, having two very solid allies beside him, Dumbledore simply had to see if he could find a way to keep them a little longer if he could. But he also had to think about the possible downside to keeping them here. He could see just from looking at them that their universe had

many differences, one seeming to be that everyone was somehow a little more intense, a little more real, a little more dangerous.

“He would probably follow me if he could.” Harry said thoughtfully. Malfoy snorted but Harry ignored him. “Most likely leaving right now would cause more damage though. Now that he’s here, I have no doubt that he’ll be looking for the other Voldemort. And if that Voldemort has been scared of Neville for all these years... well, let’s just say I don’t have much faith in this world’s survival.”

“Neville, scary?” Ron said very softly under his breath, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t get us wrong.” Hermione said quickly. “Neville’s a darling, but his dueling skills are nothing compared to Harry’s. At least, I don’t think so?” She glanced at Harry, who had actually met the Neville of this universe. Harry laughed.

“Let me just say that the Neville of this world is actually worse than that of ours. At least our Neville got trained in the DA. This Neville thinks he’s on top of the world and he hasn’t a clue how he got there or how to defend himself.”

“That’s really weird.” Ron said, arching an eyebrow. “Honestly, Neville the Boy Who Lived? He won’t believe us when we go back and tell him about it.”

“I think lots of people are going to have trouble believing us.” Harry said firmly. “Did I mention everyone here thinks I’m a moron?”

“Big stretch of the imagination, I’m sure.” Malfoy smirked.

“You’re not much better, Malfoy.” Harry sneered. “I gave you a kitten and you’ve positively fawned over her.” He was smirking as Malfoy’s eyes widened.

“You’re... you’re lying! I hate cats!”

“Better tell your counterpart that, he’s been carrying her around everywhere, acting like a real girl; no offense, ‘Mione.”

“None taken.” Hermione said, her lips twitching amusedly.

“You’re lying.” Malfoy growled. He turned and looked back at Snape with a hideously embarrassed look on his face. “Tell them that he’s lying!”

“I had no idea the creature was from Potter. You told me she was from your mother.” Snape said though he wasn’t really looking at Malfoy. Malfoy paled and turned furiously on Harry, drawing his wand sharply.

“YOU-!”

“Expelliramus!” Three voices said at once, making Malfoy slam back hard into the wall, taking the chair he was in with him and letting out a tiny groan when a large book fell on his head. Harry had caught his wand and was looking quite pleased with himself. Hermione sat back, her wand tapping against her cheek. Ron was grinning from ear to ear.

“That was a bit much.” Dumbledore said quietly.

“He was prepared to use the Unforgivables on us.” Ron said calmly and glanced at Dumbledore with an arched eyebrow. “Not as if he hasn’t done it before.” Dumbledore didn’t know what to say to this so he sat back and glanced at Snape, who was staring at the unconscious Draco Malfoy as if he were some strange, dangerous dog had followed him home.

“We really want to see the Potters and Sirius Black.” Hermione said in a decidedly cheerful voice, carefully placing her wand in her pocket. Dumbledore watched each of them put their wand in their pocket. It was, in fact, the ideal place to put a wand since it could be whipped out at a moment’s notice.

All protest died in his throat. Watching these three students, who were somehow more than students, he realized that he had no control whatsoever over them. They had a warrior-like presence about them, of having surmounted impossible obstacles and somehow coming out victorious on the other side. They had been marked with age and experiences that grown wizards had never before witnessed, and yet here they were, still children, and yet so unreachable as to be considered true adults.

Dumbledore watched them leave without uttering a word.

It was only after the door had closed and the moving staircase had quieted that Dumbledore realized that they hadn't really answered his question. He had the feeling they wouldn't leave until their Voldemort was gone, but from the way they had spoken of him, this Voldemort was far more deadly than the one who was currently plaguing the wizarding world. Some nagging voice in Dumbledore's mind tiredly noted that this was going to be one of those long, long days.

Chapter Thirty Two: Conversations

Harry felt a strange, morbid excitement as he hurried towards the Hospital Wing flanked on both sides by Ron and Hermione. It truly was exhilarating having his best friends with him, especially two best friends who were also more than aware of his magical abilities and who knew exactly what he was capable of. He hadn't realized before how much he truly missed them and relied on them to help him when he was in need, something he couldn't do with the Hermione and Ron of this universe.

Harry suspected that there was more than just one difference in the universes. Just because he wasn't the Boy Who Lived here, it didn't explain how everyone could be so different. No, there must have been something else, some other difference that had made everyone so strange. It was probably a very minor one, maybe one person marrying another that wasn't supposed to. Either way, Harry knew enough about this place to know that the people were far too different here for his own tastes.

As they slowly approached the Hospital Wing, they heard quiet whispers from within. Harry worriedly looked at his two best friends, wondering if someone had accidentally discovered the fugitives and were either approaching them or, worse, his family had been forced to defend themselves and now really had killed someone.

Ron toughened his expression and opened the door.

Sirius's hand was on the opposite doorknob and he blinked in surprise when it was wrenched away from him. For a moment he feared that they had been stupid to have slipped away from the white curtain separating them from the rest of the Hospital Wing, but he sighed in relief when he saw Ron at the door.

"Oh good, I thought for a second that... well, never mind." Sirius flashed a grin their way before his eyes landed on Harry, who was just behind Ron and beside Hermione. He stared for a long time at his godson before stepping aside. "Come in and we'll all have a chat, shall we? I hope everything went well with Dumbledore."

“As well as could be expected.” Hermione said as she ushered Ron and Harry in before she closed the door behind her. Lily and James froze where they had been getting up from James’s bed and simply stared for a long time. Harry felt his face going red and he began to fidget, trying his best not to really look at them. James and Lily, however, had no problem at all staring at their son.

Tension filled the room. Finally, Ron cleared his throat. “So, we talked to Dumbledore and things went... well, nowhere really. We can’t exactly leave now, even though we know how to.”

“Why not?” Sirius asked, keeping one eye on the Potters and the other on Ron. He had to do something to break that terrible silence.

“Well, that’s a bit of a long story but, basically, we didn’t get here all by ourselves. We followed someone else’s path and so we have to make sure that person returns as well or your universe will be in a world of trouble.” Ron said. Harry still hadn’t moved.

“He does look like me.” James said very softly. It shouldn’t have carried around the room but everyone there heard him. Lily smiled widely.

“Yes, he does, but he’s stronger than both of us.”

“You didn’t tell me he had your eyes, Lily dearest.”

“Well, I couldn’t ruin everything now could I?”

“But you have such beautiful eyes, my sweet darling.”

“Stop trying to sweet talk me, James Potter!”

“Why not? It was my sweet talking that made you marry me.”

“More like your persistence. Now stop that or you’ll embarrass Harry in front of his friends.”

“How could I possibly embarrass Harry? I’m his father!”

“Because you’re being stupid.”

“And you’re a prat.” Sirius cut in.

“Who’s side are you on, Padfoot?” James frowned.

“I’m on Lily’s side this time. She’s scarier than you.”

Harry started laughing. Everyone turned to look at him as he clung to Ron’s arm before finally sinking to the floor, laughing so hard that tears of mirth streamed down his face. Lily’s face softened but James looked a little nervous. Why was he laughing? It wasn’t that funny...

That was when he realized that Harry wasn’t just laughing. He was crying. Sobs began to choke out the laughter and soon he was rubbing his eyes and struggling for breath, trying to smile but utterly failing. Hermione knelt beside Harry and hugged him, letting him cry against her shoulder. She looked up imploringly at Ron who smiled grimly at her, glancing back at the stunned Azkaban escapees.

“Harry doesn’t... cry often. I think he’s gone temporarily loopy.” Harry started laughing harder at this, hiccupping a bit before managing to control himself a little.

“I’ve just never heard my parents have such a long conversation before.” He said, smiling up at them with tear stains down his cheeks. Sirius felt his heart clog his throat, constricting his windpipe. That was a long conversation for him?

“Harry...” James began quietly, his eyes filled with worry, “if it makes you so sad, I’ll shut up for as long as you want me to.”

“No no, that’s not it.” Harry said, smiling though his voice held a bit of sorrow still. “I’ve never gotten to hear you speak when you were, well, here and... alive.” He seemed to flounder for something to say before shaking his head. “I don’t really know why I just... started in like that. Sorry, I really must be going mad.”

“Oh Harry,” Lily whispered and launched herself at him. Harry took a step back but still managed to catch her as she gave him a tight hug. “I’m so proud of you.” She whispered in his ear, smiling deliriously. She kissed his cheek and neck, hugging him as tightly as she could. Harry gasped at the pressure of such a frail person giving him such a strong hug. “You won’t ever have to go away again, your dad and I will have hour-long conversations and you won’t have to be separated from us anymore.”

Hermione and Ron exchanged a pain look when they saw the hunched way Harry was standing. They knew what this meant to him, having his mother holding him and talking to him when Harry knew very well that he couldn’t stay. Finally, Harry’s arms came around his mother’s small waist and he lifted her off the ground, hugging her as tightly as he could. James hurried forward at this and hugged both his wife and son, grinning from ear to ear.

“You have to tell me everything.” He said excitedly. “Your friends told us a little but I want to know absolutely everything!”

“And he means everything.” Sirius chirped.

“There’s a LOT.” Harry’s muffled voice came from somewhere within James’s shoulder.

“Well, we want to hear it anyway.” Lily said stubbornly, moving back to smile brightly up at him. “Every last detail. I don’t care if it’s from this universe or... or whatever, I want to hear it.”

“Well, Ron and Hermione can help since they were there for...” he paused for a moment, “all of it really. Well, nearly all of it.” Ron beamed and Hermione looked bashful. They were ushered behind the white screen erected to hide the fugitives. Hermione casted a Silencing spell around them and they sank into the beds, conjuring a couple chairs. Harry took a deep breath and then he looked from his mother’s loving smile to his father’s hopeful expression, finally to Sirius’s proud grin. He opened his mouth and started from the beginning.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, his eyes fixated on the mantel above his fireplace, his thoughts hundreds of miles away. Snape had already taken the Malfoy boy to one of the dungeon rooms and had locked him inside, also taking the precaution of confiscating his wand. Snape had orders to round up McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout (all the Heads of the houses) for an emergency meeting. He was thinking about all of the information that had come to him and he was still not entirely clear on everything. The problem was, of course, that he didn't have a sufficient amount of time to come up with the best way to use this new information to his advantage. Either way, something had to be done and thus, the meeting.

The four professors trickled in, followed surprisingly by Evans. Dumbledore leaned back in his chair when he noticed the Auror enter the room. He had been on several missions for the Order of the Phoenix, one of which occurred a little after the new Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley had appeared but, luckily, his absence had been quite easy to explain away. He had been ordered to gather other members of Dumbledore's team so that they knew about the new players in the game. They too would have a meeting soon.

"Is something wrong, Albus?" McGonagall asked once everyone was made comfortable with tea and scones. No one had dared interrupt the Headmaster while he was in the middle of a thought but McGonagall just couldn't sit there any longer without breaking the silence.

Dumbledore lowered his eyes to her and smiled reassuringly. "There is nothing exactly wrong." He said. The Heads looked at each other wearily, all save Snape of course. "Have any of you noticed any of the students behaving in a peculiar way lately?"

"What do you mean?" Sprout asked suspiciously. She rested her tea back on its saucer, giving Dumbledore a piercing stare. "Is this about the Death Eater attacks in Diagon Alley? Is Neville in danger?" Dumbledore lifted a hand before the others could comment.

“As far as I know, this does not have anything to do with the Death Eater attacks or Mr. Longbottom.” Everyone heaved a sigh of relief at this, some more obvious than others. Snape remained completely still watching Dumbledore. “I am referring to Mr. Harry Potter.”

Silence followed for a moment before they began to mumble. “Mr. Potter has shown extraordinary improvement in his Charms class.” Flitwick admitted. “It is nearly unreal. The change was not gradual either, but instantaneous. I don’t know what could have happened but he became quite good at the subject. I was not aware if he had a tutor but I thought that was the reason.”

“Potter’s work in Herbology has shown a very noticeable decline, at least at first. He has improved since then but his green thumb has proven to be far less extraordinary than the rest of the class. He was once my prize student.” Sprout appeared embarrassed to admit this but, since Flitwick had already admitted noticing something strange, she thought it was best to announce her own findings.

“His Transfiguration skills have surpassed quite a few of the other students.” McGonagall said at last. “He is always restraining himself in class, I know, I have seen it myself. When he thinks no one else is watching, he will perform some of the most complex spells in a matter of seconds. When he has assured himself that he knows how to do it properly, he reverses the spell and does an extravagant job of convincing others that he doesn’t know which end of the wand to use. I always thought his behavior a bit peculiar.”

Dumbledore remained silent, watching his teachers look embarrassed for not having noted these changes sooner. He relaxed ever so slightly in his chair, steepling his fingers under his chin. “You have, at the very least, noticed these changes. I am ashamed to say that I have not seen even the signs that Mr. Potter may not be who we thought he was.”

“Albus?” McGonagall sounded a little nervous now. “Is he a... Death Eater in disguise?”

“How could I not have seen it?” Flitwick whispered, eyes wide.

“No, he is not a Death Eater. At least, I don’t believe he is.” Dumbledore said calmly. “I had a conversation with Mr. Potter and his two friends, Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley.”

McGonagall’s head shot up, her eyes wide with surprise. “What do Mr. Potter’s changes have anything to do with Ms. Granger?”

“Everything, it seems.” Dumbledore leaned forward. “The Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger with whom I was conversing were not, in fact, from this universe. As it turns out, Mr. Potter was brought here from his home universe by way of the Vocare Prabia incantation in a book which has been banned to the Restricted Section since Christmas.” Since the other teachers were not familiar with this spell, they turned to a pale-faced Professor Flitwick. “Did Ms. Granger approach you about this spell?”

“Yes... now I remember.” Flitwick said hoarsely, his hands shaking. “Towards the beginning of the year, Ms. Granger was excited to do some extra credit I had mentioned off-handedly. Ms. Granger was always such a clever student, always performing to her peak, always asking me whether she could try this or that spell. This time she... I thought she was asking me if she could try it but, the way Ms. Granger and the other two looked so... surprised when I explained the spell, I should have realized! She and Mr. Weasley must have done the spell and the Mr. Potter they were with, he must have been the one!”

“He was.” Dumbledore said gravely. “And it appears that his universe is quite different from ours.”

“How so?” Sprout asked carefully. Evans and Snape had not moved a muscle since their discussion began but both now rose and left the room quietly. Only Dumbledore seemed to notice. “What differences could there be? He blended in well enough to fool us so it couldn’t have been that different.”

“In this other universe, it appears that it was Mr. Potter, and not Mr. Longbottom, who survived Lord Voldemort’s curse. It also appears

that Mr. Potter has been quite a bit more hands-on about battling the Dark Lord, as his two best friends appear to be as well. Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger appear to be quite a bit closer to Mr. Potter in their universe since they were very protective of him when we spoke. I have a feeling that they lived in a world far darker than our own.”

“Darker in what ways?” McGonagall asked. She didn’t really want to know, but she was compelled to ask. Flitwick and Sprout held their breaths.

“Well, for one, I believe that Mr. Potter’s parents sacrificed their lives to protect him and so, they were not Death Eaters at all. Also, from what I have gathered from the portraits and other inhabitants of the school, Sirius Black was also innocent, convicted, in fact, of a murder he did not commit. He too died in their world, fighting to protect his godson.”

The teachers took a couple of seconds to gather their thoughts after this bombshell landed in their laps.

“It also appears that the Voldemort of that world is noticeably more powerful and sinister. This I have gathered from spies who have already seen the other Voldemort. Now,” he raised his hand to stop the surprised responses before they could begin, “listen please. After Mr. Potter arrived here, it seems that the Voldemort of his universe grew quite angry and found a way to use some sort of connection the two have in order to bring himself and one Death Eater with him. After these two, Mr. Potter’s two best friends, Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger, followed into our universe. Those were the ones with which I was conversing.”

“Two of them...” Flitwick whispered, trembling.

“Yes, two of them.” Dumbledore said firmly. “It is because of this added threat to our universe that Mr. Potter and his friends have decided to remain here in order to help us fight Voldemort.”

“Albus!” Sprout breathed, “He is a child!”

“It appears that he has fought Voldemort and survived about six times I believe.” Dumbledore said coolly. “We have no choice in the matter. We cannot force them to leave and, to be honest, we could use the help if there are now two Dark Lords to contend with.” The teachers stayed together for most of the day conversing about what was to be done. In the end, everyone left quite a bit more confused and upset than when entering the Headmaster’s office.

Chapter Thirty Three: The Challenge

Standing in the remnants of his old house, Tom Marvolo Riddle (known now as Lord Voldemort) felt highly unimpressed with the dimness around him. He had stopped hiding out in a run-down pigsty since he'd had time to escape his soulless half-life. Now, with his body intact and the Wizarding world aware of his existence, there had been no reason to live in the sewers like vermin. He had spent some of his time in the Malfoy Mansion, in the Nott Estate, and various other locations much better suited to his needs than the Riddle house.

And yet, here he was again. He was unimpressed, even repulsed by the very presence of the house, and yet he felt drawn to its ugliness somehow. His father had been born here, and raised here, and he had died here. How very ironic the Fates were sometimes. This was also the house in which he should have been raised and cared for, not that Voldemort had any regrets about his childhood. A person could not be changed entirely based on their upbringing, and Voldemort would have been highly insulted if he had turned out differently if his father had wanted him. Things were the way they were and he really had no inclination to start wondering if he would have been a "better man" if raised differently.

Truth be told, he didn't think it would have made much difference. He liked killing too much.

He looked around at the confused Death Eaters flanking him on all sides. The fools seemed to think he was some sort of imposter. Voldemort had, of course, calculated this reaction and had restrained himself with ease, allowing them to "capture" him and "bring the fake to the Master." He understood their suspicion and he would punish them for it later, but for now they were playing right into his hands.

For a moment he wondered how his faithful servant, Draco Malfoy, was performing at Hogwarts. The boy had had far less experience and control when Voldemort had first seen him. His lack of self control and his pathetic dignity had nearly got him killed, especially when the subject of Voldemort's "dirty blood" came up. Still, the potential in him was enormous and Voldemort had done nearly everything in his power to torture and stretch the boy's mind, twisting

his soul every which way until he was no longer the sniveling, arrogant brat Lucius had brought before him.

That boy, that cowardly, useless child was long gone and, in his place, a servant who did his bidding to the highest degree. It had taken him a long, long time to train the boy, using some of the most terrible and humiliating methods at his disposal. The boy had to be isolated from all human contact, tortured on a daily basis, forced to do the work of servants and the servants of servants, cleaning and scrubbing and cooking and lifting and breaking and everything that had to be done, and some things that did not have to be done. All were done to condition the boy's mind and body to obey every single one of his orders. And it had worked better than even he had anticipated.

The Death Eaters had stopped walking now. They stood in the living room, their wands pointed at him, their eyes instantly searching out for their Master. Voldemort felt a strange surge of arrogance rise up in his chest as he felt their need for dominance, their need for guidance, their need for him. Oh, what would they do without him?

"Master, we found this trespasser pretending to be you." Someone said. Voldemort instantly recognized Wormtail's voice. A wave of disgust swept through him for a moment.

He detested turncoats nearly as much as he detested Muggles. They were utterly spineless and more likely to change sides depending on who was winning and who was losing. They also only turned to his cause to save their own worthless lives. He hated them with a roaring passion. It was those such as the Malfoys and Voldemort's other closest followers who he held in high esteem (or at least in as high esteem as a servant can be held) because they followed him for the power and not for their own continued existence. They felt the surge of pride and power when they were on his side, though they knew better than to think that they are not expendable should they fail to follow orders.

Something stirred in the shadows and a man stepped away from the fireplace. It was so strange, but Voldemort noticed for the first time just how tall he truly was. He rose above nearly all of his Death

Eaters. His shoulders were squared, his chin was held high, his eyes were cool and collected and always in control.

“I did not think anyone in the world would ever be stupid enough to waltz into my stronghold and attempt to take my place.” The other Voldemort said conversationally. Voldemort smirked. This was exactly the way he would have also handled such a situation.

“Well, I’m not waltzing anywhere. I am here as myself, despite what everyone present may believe.” He spread his arms invitingly, his manner pleasant and inviting. “We have, after all, a common enemy, do we not? The Boy Who Lived.”

The other Voldemort snorted and a couple of Death Eaters laughed. “It appears you have missed quite a few years of history, whoever you think you are.” He smirked smugly. “The Boy Who Lived is no threat to me, nor has he ever been.”

“I’m not talking about that one.” Voldemort said patiently. A great sense of boredom filled him. What would it have really been like without Potter having been around? Would it have been this simple for someone to simply come to the edge of his stronghold and have to announce his presence for the other Death Eaters to notice? More still, were they really so stupid that they would just bring him to their Dark Lord?

His stronghold, his true stronghold, was fortified with dementors and quite a few vampires (mostly to keep the dementors from killing potentially valuable guests). His Death Eaters had been trained to take everything seriously, every little threat and possibility of attack. Guards were set up at every entrance, every Death Eater reported directly to him without bringing any prisoners to him unless he himself ordered it. Even with his new power, Voldemort had finally learned that he wasn’t invincible. He wasn’t sure how to protect himself if Potter showed up, especially because the boy seemed full of rather lethal surprises, but a very small voice had been steadily growing louder ever since he had returned to his body. That voice had finally made sense. It’s exciting having an opponent like Potter.

In fact, Potter was the whole reason he was here. At first, when he had received news that the boy had disappeared, he had been ecstatic. He had won. There was no one who could stop him now. The way was paved clear for his quick ascent to power. The world was his.

And yet... it hadn't been enough. He hadn't been the one to kill Potter. He hadn't been the one to possibly cause the boy's death. He was no longer invincible. If Potter was still around, at least he could show the Wizarding world that he could still beat him, if not immediately. But he was gone.

He had begun careful planning and research. He discovered very quickly that Potter actually was not dead, but rather displaced. He became obsessed with finding him. And now he had. And now things were exciting again.

"What other one?" The other Voldemort didn't seem to care that he was breaking into his counterpart's thoughts. Voldemort frowned slightly, momentarily having lost his thoughts. When he had collected them, he turned a smug grin towards his audience.

"Why, the one from my universe of course." The other Voldemort looked only marginally interested. "He is quite the adversary. He has escaped me numerous times. One of my prize Death Eaters was, in fact, sacrificed in light of having returned me to my body. Bartholomew Crouch Jr." At this, one of the Death Eaters stirred. "The Minister was foolish enough to bring in a dementor while he was being questioned, though I must say that it was a stroke of luck. No one truly believed that I had returned until two years later. Those that mattered knew that I was alive though." His eyes flickered briefly toward Lucius Malfoy.

Ah yes, he too had been a prize Death Eater. He had lost some favor when he had been foolish enough to give his diary into the hands of the youngest member of a family of enemies. Still, Voldemort had to admire the underhanded sneakiness of it all. If Potter had not interfered, the Weasley family would have been permanently out of

his hair as well. The swarming lot of them had turned out to be just as meddlesome as their red hair promised.

“You are a fool, to believe I would simply believe you.” The other Voldemort sneered, yet again intruding on his counterpart’s thoughts. Voldemort glared at him scathingly, resisting the urge to simply kill him.

“If you try to move against Hogwarts now, you will fail.” He said simply. “My spy is already within and has completed his mission. The boy is still within, and he is now out of my reach again. Again he has escaped. Again, and again, and again.” The words produced a taste of blood in his mouth. He hated it, but he loved it too. The challenge was what he had lived his long life for. “He will not be easily defeated.”

“Master, shall I dispose of him?” Wormtail’s voice piped up. He sounded eager to please, as always. Voldemort’s cold, red eyes turned to his henchman. Oh yes, he had proven to be useful in quite a few surprising areas. But right then, it didn’t matter. Hatred began to fill his vision and an aura of power exuded into the room. Everyone took an involuntary step back as they sensed rather than saw the danger they were suddenly in.

“I did not come here to be insulted by such a weak attempt at threatening me.” Voldemort hissed, his voice having dropped an octave. A hooded woman, Bellatrix, visibly shivered, as if a dementor had placed its scaly arm on her neck. “I came here to kill the boy, once and for all. Anyone who stands in my way will be disposed of immediately.”

“Aveda...”

Voldemort instantly drew his wand and shifted out of the way with ease before the spell could even be spoken. With an easy grace he pressed his wand between the eyes of his counterpart. The other Voldemort’s eyes widened as he saw that he was now, for the very first time in his life, vulnerable to death.

“Finish that statement and you will find that I won’t even forgive you for such an insult.” The words were so easy. No challenge, a bored voice in Voldemort’s head reminded him. This was all a waste of his time, he knew. This was the first time since he had arrived that he really missed his home, where his Death Eaters knew better, where they were stronger, where they had learned that loyalty was rewarded, and anything else was a death sentence.

“Now, we are going to stop this foolishness immediately, and you are going to do exactly as I tell you.” Voldemort continued, quite pleasantly. “First of all, I want to know where the Boy Who Lived is and his history here.”

“Neville Longbottom.” Lucius Malfoy piped up. Voldemort turned an arched eyebrow at the blond Death Eater. Lucius bristled for a moment before standing to his full height. “Neville Longbottom is currently attending Hogwarts. He is not a threat.” The end part sounded just a tad snobbish but Voldemort ignored it, his wand still on his counterpart’s forehead.

“Well well well, now I see where the universe branched off. You marked the weaker of the two.” Voldemort’s eyes turned slowly, his grin vicious. “You marked the wrong one from the Prophecy.” A soft whoosh of air betrayed the shock that went through the entire group. “It was Harry Potter, you fool. He is the threat.”

“He’s dead.” Wormtail said, his voice disgusted. “I killed him myself. I burned his body. He’s dead.”

“He is a weakling in this universe.” Lucius continued. “My son, Draco, has told me.”

“Perhaps he is here, where everyone is so pathetically weak.” Voldemort said dismissively. “Neither is he dead. In fact, oh, yes, that does explain why no one was alerted to his presence.” Voldemort was again lost in thought. “The boy replaced his counterpart after Wormtail killed him, of course! And no one is aware of the switch. He must have hidden his magical potential, of course! That was the anger I sensed.”

“My lord?” Lucius said gently. The other Voldemort was glaring at him with the utmost contempt. Lucius had picked a side, and the winning side really, considering who was at the end of who’s wand.

“The Potter boy is still in the castle, posing as himself.” Voldemort said casually. “And my servant is within. Soon, he will bring me news. He is, after all, your son, Lucius.” Lucius’s face went from confused to flabbergasted in a matter of seconds. “Yes, he is my servant. He has proven to be invaluable.”

Voldemort slowly turned his eyes on his counterpart and grinned. “Now, what am I going to do with you? I can’t possibly have you around to disrupt my authority.” And his smirk grew. “Aveda Kedavra!” And, just like that, there was only one Voldemort.

Harry felt a slight tingling in his scar and frowned, rubbing his forehead. Hermione and Ron gave him questioning looks but didn’t say anything. They knew what that look meant and the slight wince meant, but they weren’t about to interrupt Harry’s time with his parents for Voldemort talk. That could wait.

“Harry, are you okay?” It seemed that Lily wasn’t as blind as they had hoped she would be. Harry smiled thinly.

“I’m fine, mum, don’t worry about me.” He winced again, this time rubbing harder at his scar.

“Are you sure?” James looked worried now too, peering at his son’s forehead. Sirius boldly reached his fingers out to brush the bangs off Harry’s forehead to show the scar. It was red and swollen.

“Harry... what is that?” Lily whispered, her eyes going wide.

“My scar.” Harry said simply. Lily looked embarrassed that she had forgotten her son’s fame. Harry smiled. “Please don’t worry about me, I’m fine.” Hermione and Ron exchanged a worried look and moved to sit closer to Harry. “Guys, really!” Harry said exasperatedly.

The door to the Hospital Wing opened and everyone within held their breath, eyes widening. Behind the screen, two figures came closer. Harry instinctively reached for his wand, eyes narrowing as he stared at the spot before him.

“Put that away, Potter.” Snape’s cool, clipped voice said as he and Evans stepped out into their line of vision. All of them stiffened at the sight of the Potion’s master. Evans grinned and waved.

“Hey Evans.”

“What are you doing here, Quinton?” Lily suddenly returned to her senses, a frown spreading across her face.

“Well, I’m glad to see you too, sis.” Quinton said, rolling his eyes. All eyes turned to Quinton this time.

“S-Sis?” Harry whispered.

“Yes, sis. She’s my sister, in a manner of speaking.” Evans said, still grinning.

“I’m confused.” Ron said, eyes widen. “I thought you only had that horrible sister for a sibling!”

“Petunia is her only sibling.” James said, his eyes locked on Snape’s.

“That really doesn’t make sense.” Ron said after a moment. Hermione was frowning, obviously trying to work out this strange puzzle.

“We met you in our universe, but you never said why you were in the Order.” She said. Evans looked momentarily surprised but then grinned disarmingly.

“I didn’t? Well, that makes sense. I don’t tell many people.”

“Who would want to hear you were mooching off Lily and Evans?” Sirius said with a slight sneer. Lily smacked his arm, frowning as she turned her attention back to Evans, who was smiling back at her.

“I saved his life during a mission.” Lily explained, still giving Evans a strange look. “He was a Death Eater. I caught him trying to break into the house of a couple friends of ours. It was a few days after the defeat of the Dark Lord actually. Anyway, they had a guard dog, non-magical. He attacked Quinton and his wand was the first thing to snap. The dog was trained to attack any intruders that the family didn’t bring in specifically. He was specifically trained to kill Death Eaters because of the number of death threats on the family. He was going to kill Quinton but I... well, I intervened.”

“And thus, I was reborn!” Evans said dramatically. “And stole this charming lady’s maiden name.”

“And never left us alone.” James added with a scowl.

“Not the point.” Evans said cheerfully.

“As sweet as all of this is, we aren’t here for any sort of reunions.” Snape said bitingly. Sirius sneered and opened his mouth but Harry grunted and rubbed his forehead. Hermione and Ron moved closer to him, their eyes fearful.

“Harry, you have to lie down. I think he-,”

“No.” Harry growled. He glared up at Snape. “Why are you here? I’m sure you wouldn’t come here in front of my dad and Sirius unless you thought whatever you have to say is useful.” Snape’s eyes became dark with anger and just a hint of malice. Harry hadn’t seen hatred like that since having left the real Snape in his own universe.

“If you can keep from passing out from some unknown ailment, I am here to tell you that the professors are now aware of your true identity. The Headmaster had a meeting with all the heads of house and now we are all up to speed. As far as I know, he told them everything. They will undoubtedly approach you now about your universe.”

Snape wasn't looking at him. He was glaring at James. James, in turn, was glaring at Snape. Sirius also took part in the glaring contest.

"I guess that's a good thing. People have to understand the danger they're in." Harry said. "We should probably inform the Daily Prophet of the new threat too. A panic may spread, but we really should get people to know. The Order has to be rounded up. People have to understand how dangerous Voldemort is."

"Don't say the name." Snape hissed, his eyes narrowing.

"Scared to hear your master's name?" Sirius hissed.

"Both of you shut up." Harry growled. Both turned surprised eyes on him. "Your stupid rivalry doesn't matter. That's the whole reason Sirius died, because of your arguing." The last part was said with venomous hatred. Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder, looking worried. Sirius had paled within seconds. "Now listen, Voldemort is stronger than you can realize. He's going to target you specifically to get at me. He-," Harry choked and doubled over, his hands going up to his forehead.

"Harry!" Lily gasped, her eyes going wide.

"No, don't." Harry groaned weakly. "He'll sense you, don't touch me!" He tried to stand but he stumbled. Ron caught him and held him as Hermione soothingly pulled his bangs out of his eyes. Harry was panting hard, clenching his teeth.

"Harry..." Ron said worriedly. "He's going to kill someone, isn't he."

The silence this caused was only broken by Harry's ragged breathing.

"Yes." The second the word came out, he started screaming.

Chapter Thirty Four: The Point of No Return

Sprout shifted nervously beside McGonagall. She wasn't sure exactly why she had agreed to this but, in retrospect, she had been desperate to do something after Dumbledore had all but dumped this new information in their collective laps.

So Harry Potter isn't the real Harry Potter anymore. He was before the school year, or possibly before that? Flitwick is so terrible with dates sometimes. He could have been here for the whole year. We didn't have class for a week or so before Harry started displaying signs of having lost his ability to handle and heal plants so it could have happened at any time at the start of term. Or was that later? Have I forgotten the dates too?

No, now was not the time to think about this. Mrs. Pettigrew was on her way here after a very worried note from McGonagall.

Minerva is completely overreacting. I don't think she honestly knows what she's doing. In fact, I don't think she really knows what the Headmaster meant at all. McGonagall had taken it as a personal offense that she had not realized that a member of her own house, a member of her favored year in fact, had not been the person who's security she had been entrusted with. According to the new Harry Potter (who wasn't all that new), the real Harry Potter was dead. His death was on McGonagall's head, or at least she thought so. He had died while in her custody and she had only now found out.

The only way she saw of fixing this mistake was summoning the guardian of that person to apologize and explain the situation. She had not consulted Dumbledore nor had she waited for anyone else's opinion. The guilt of not being strong enough had removed the woman's wits, Sprout was sure. In fact, the only reason she knew what was going on was because she had followed a pacing McGonagall to her office to try to calm her down only to have the Gryffindor Head of House blurt everything out, slightly hysterical.

"Minerva, do you understand what you just did?" Sprout had demanded, exasperated. "You are going to call the woman here and explain to her that her adoptive son is dead, when or how we don't

know, but that one from another universe has magically appeared, who, by the way, has expressed very clearly that his parents died for him and are therefore innocent of the crimes they are currently charged with and, therefore, he doesn't even know who she is?"

McGonagall had turned increasingly whiter as Sprout continued. The Gryffindor in the woman had obviously taken control, Sprout realized with a resigned sigh. There was nothing for it now. Mrs. Pettigrew was already on her way and the two professors would just have to come up with some brilliant plan to ensure that they wouldn't cause a hysterical situation to take place that could potentially get them all killed (if the wrong ears heard them).

"We really should go to the Headmaster with this." Sprout reminded McGonagall.

"No." McGonagall said firmly. "I made this blunder and I will fix it." Sprout shifted from foot to foot.

"Minerva, this isn't... something that you can just explain away. Yes, you may have started this but it's not just your pride at stake here." McGonagall scowled and opened her mouth but just then, Filch knocked on the office door and poked his head inside.

"There's a Mrs. Pettigrew here to see you, ma'am." He looked only slightly disgusted, which probably meant that Mrs. Pettigrew hadn't done anything terribly obnoxious. McGonagall paled and nodded, running a hand through her perfectly groomed hair before glancing quietly at Sprout, perhaps for strength.

"Let her in please, Argus." McGonagall said, lifting her chin bravely.

Filch nodded once and disappeared behind the door. A couple seconds later another woman entered. She was a portly old dame with watery blue eyes like her son and a mat of thin blonde hair atop a flat head. She waddled into the room dragging a crocodile skin handbag in one meaty hand and an expression of overwhelming worry on her face. She knew that something had happened to Harry,

the boy she had taken in and treated as her own son, the boy who had taken the place of her true dead son, Peter.

Sprout drew herself up a little, setting her face in a stern expression. There was something about Mrs. Anne Pettigrew that just did not sit well with the Herbology professor. It wasn't that she had an evil aura or that she even radiated any kind of wickedness or ill will. No, it was more a sense of the nagging mother, one of those that worried when there was no cause to, a woman who became hysterical at the smallest amount of danger, the sort of woman whose sanity hung on the happiness of her children. She had no life. Her children were her life. Her children's lives were hers. Sprout never liked people like that.

"What's wrong with Harry? You said it was urgent! Is he okay? Where is he? Is he in the Hospital Wing?" She started at once. She tried to pull her ugly, disgusting handbag higher on her shoulder but the straps kept getting loose and drooping so that she was constantly adjusting it. "Why aren't we there? He's okay, isn't he? Oh Merlin! His horrible parents didn't find him did they?" She swooned and her eyes started rolling back into her head but she seemed to control herself because she remained standing.

"Please calm down, Mrs. Pettigrew." McGonagall said in a clipped, uptight voice. Sprout looked at her colleague and felt pity for the proud woman. She looked nervous enough to start crying.

"Please, call me Anne." She said nervously. McGonagall stiffened even more.

"There are some facts that you should be aware of." She said jerkily. Anne immediately gasped and covered her mouth in horror.

"He is hurt, isn't he!" She turned on her heel swinging her handbag wildly. She threw open the door and waddled away towards the Hospital Wing shrieking Harry's name. McGonagall and Sprout exchanged a shocked and helpless expression before dashing off after her.

Harry slowly opened his eyes and smiled burly at his mother's worried face. Lily whimpered and wrapped her arms around his head, letting out a terrified sob when she realized that he was awake. James leapt to her side, staring down worriedly at Harry. His glasses nearly fell off his nose before he could stop them. He looked weakly up at Sirius who was standing behind Ron and Hermione. Harry tried to laugh at the expression of guilt and worry etched on their faces.

"Guys, you've seen this happen to me so many times." He said. "I'm sure you're sick of seeing me rolling around screaming like a little girl."

"Of course we are, Harry. So stop doing it." Ron said, unable to even grin at his best friend.

"Don't say that. It was awful." Lily whispered in a tremulous voice. Harry smiled up at her as cheerfully as he could manage with his scar still bleeding.

"Mum really, please don't worry. At least I got a break from it for a while."

"You mean you lived with this every day?" James whispered softly.

"Yeah." Harry rose to his feet and dusted off his robes feeling slightly light-headed. He didn't dare show it though since he didn't want his parents to worry. He wanted to be the one to worry about them for once. After all, how could you worry about your parents if they were dead? True, he was terrified of having them in danger at all, but a little part of him, the mothering part, was ecstatic that he could look after them and protect them.

"Why don't we sneak down to the kitchens and nick some food for you?" Ron suddenly piped up. He and Hermione were instantly on either side of him, smiling reassuringly at James and Lily. "It's usually a good idea for Harry to eat after this happens you know? We'll get you some stuff. You still like chicken, right Sirius?"

“What? Oh yes, I love chicken.” Sirius said, slight confusion on his face.

“Will you be okay, Harry?” Lily interrupted, seeming not to have heard Ron. She had eyes only for Harry.

“I’m as healthy as a hippogriff, mum.” Harry said with a blinding smile. He used the back of his sleeve to wipe off the blood from his scar. He paused and looked around, frowning. “Hey, what happened to Snape and Evans?”

“I am still here, Potter.” Snape said coolly as he slipped out from behind the white curtain separating them from the exposure of the hallway. He looked quite disgruntled but was controlling himself rather well. “I suppose you really are who you say you are.” He was also rubbing the inside of his left forearm.

“So you felt him calling too I guess.” Harry said as he stared at the spot. Silence followed as the air tensed around him.

“What?”

“You felt Voldemort calling through the Mark.” Harry said with a slight frown. “Didn’t you? When I was in school you did. Every time my scar hurt after He was brought back you could feel it.”

More silence followed, this time more dangerous. Harry felt that he had just made a momentous mistake in having said this, though he wasn’t sure yet why this was dangerous. He frowned and looked between an equally confused Ron and alarmed Hermione.

“Death Eater.” Sirius hissed venomously. The pure hatred that dripped from his mouth so shocked Harry that he almost thought the real Sirius, the Sirius of his own universe, had somehow possessed this other Sirius and imbued him with the same intense emotion that was so characteristically Sirius, such a strong emotion that didn’t seem to exist in this weaker place.

“He’s on our side.” Harry said quickly when he realized. Snape looked like a trapped animal and he glared venomously at Harry. “Hey, it’s common knowledge among the Order that you’re on our side!” Harry added sheepishly at the look.

“Potter, I don’t think you’ve ever said something so utterly stupid before.”

“Don’t you dare call my son stupid.” James growled with growing anger. Harry again was surprised by the raw emotion that was now radiating off Sirius and his father. He wasn’t used to this anymore. He had grown accustomed to people’s emotions being watered down and not even close to dangerous.

“Please...” Harry started but Snape interrupted him.

“Potter, I’ve never met a more stupid child.” Snape said in a very low voice.

“You slimy, disgusting-,”

“Expelliarmus!” Hermione said firmly. The wand the fugitives had stolen, firmly clutched in Sirius’s hand, and Snape’s wand instantly leapt into her own outstretched hand. Both men turned hideous glares on her but she didn’t so much as blink. “Look at you, acting like children yourselves.” She said harshly. “Is there a moment that you don’t think with your lower regions?” Lily actually laughed at this. Hermione grinned at her. “Now, I’m not going to give you back your wands until you all decide to act your age which is, by the way, higher than three.”

“Ms. Granger, give me back my wand.” Snape said in a calm, lowered voice. The similarity between their own Potions master and this, his counterpart, was frighteningly complete. Harry felt Ron shift uneasily and reach for his wand to help Hermione if the need arose.

“Not until you form a truce to at least be civil.” She said firmly. He started towards her, his eyes narrowing horribly.

“Give me the wand, Granger!”

“I said, no.” Hermione quickly leapt back behind Harry, her own wand pointed directly at Snape’s chest. He stopped mid-step and glared horribly at the three Gryffindors with their wands all pointed at him. “Don’t make us attack you, professor. For us, this is a matter of life and death. We can’t leave you four alone and expect you not to kill each other while we’re gone.”

“Don’t mess with ‘Mione.” Ron added. “She’s brilliant. Scary, but brilliant.”

Snape stood stiff and angry, his face contorted and fighting to remain calm. He opened his mouth but, at that moment, the doors to the Hospital Wing slammed open and a terrible, deep-throated voice shrieked “HARRY!” at the top of her lungs. Harry felt the skin on the back of his neck stand on end when he heard this terrible voice and turned horrified eyes to his friends. Ron and Hermione had started too.

Lily was smart enough to grab the Invisibility Cloak that Ron and Hermione had brought them and ducked under it, grabbing her husband and Sirius to hide under it quickly. Hermione quickly pocketed the second wand and tossed Snape his own wand just when the white curtain between them and the door was flipped over and a great behemoth of a woman rushed forward and engulfed Harry in the many great folds of arms, chest, neck, chin, shoulder.

Ron gawked, Hermione’s eyebrows shot open, and Snape arched an eyebrow.

“Oh Harry, I was so worried about you! Oh sweetie, oh my little body, Harrikins! Are you okay?” The whole time she was shaking herself from side to side, dragging Harry’s petrified body with it so that his feet dragged rather painfully on the floor. Harry tried to say something but his mouth was completely covered by the shoulder he had been pressed into.

Lily growled very lowly from behind them, invisible and tucked away. Hermione sent a warning look in the general direction the sound had come from.

Finally, two people came rushing in after her. McGonagall was out of breath and light gray strands of hair were sticking out of her bun. Sprout was breathing heavily, leaning against her companion's shoulder to rest. Anne Pettigrew finally deposited Harry on his own two feet though she didn't take her meaty hands off his shoulders. She stared into his face, the loud smell of onions laced among every word she said.

"Harry, my dear Harry! They scared me so much, saying you were in danger!" She looked him over and frowned. "You're far too thin. What are they feeding you in this place?" Her eyes flicked up sharply and paused. "Darling, why are you bleeding?" She moved aside his bangs before he could sufficiently regain his senses. "Harry!" She gasped when she saw the nasty gash. McGonagall and Sprout stared at the tell-tale mark.

"Get away from me!" Harry suddenly hissed, leaping back. He brushed his bangs down to cover the scar. Sprout came closer, her eyes still wide.

"Dumbledore wasn't wrong." She mumbled. Harry gave her an accusing look. "Don't look at me, it was her who called... er, that is-," she stopped at the scathing look McGonagall was now giving her.

"What are you all on about? Harry dear, are you alright? Do you want to come home? You haven't answered any of my letters you know! I've been so worried about you!" She tried to come closer but Harry nimbly moved out of the way, his wand slightly raised. Someone made a soft cheering sound and was immediately silenced.

"Stay away." He growled softly.

"Harry, what's wrong?" She looked as if she was prepared to burst into tears at any moment.

“Just stay away from him.” Ron said firmly, coming up beside his best friend. Hermione tightened her grip on her wand and bared her teeth threateningly. Anne appeared confused by their “sudden” appearance (she had only had eyes for Harry but now that she saw he was alive and breathing, she was able to see that others were present).

“Severus, what are you doing here?” McGonagall suddenly said. She looked stiff still but her eyes flashed suspiciously. “I thought you had a class.”

“Funny, I recall you had a similar duty.” Snape said coolly. Harry frowned as he looked around at all of the expressions around him. Snape was finally under control, Anne looked close to a hernia, McGonagall was uncomfortable and suspicious, Sprout was confused and worried. He very much wanted to see what his parents looked like right now.

“Harry, I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t feel that it’s safe. We’re going home.” Anne said, her voice taking on a strangely firm quality that she didn’t seem capable of.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” Harry said, straightening to his full height. Now, he was an entire foot taller than Anne. The extra height gave him just enough leverage to level a withering look at her. Anne seemed to buckle under those piercing, angry eyes.

“Harry, why are you doing this?” She sobbed and fell to her knees. Harry felt uncomfortable that he had made her cry but he really didn’t care. He was not going with the woman.

“Severus, really, what are you doing here?” McGonagall interrupted again.

“Potter cut himself during my Potions class and I accompanied him. His friends arrived a few minutes ago.” He said calmly. “Now if you will excuse me, Potter and I still have some business to discuss.”

“Harry isn’t going anywhere except home!” Anne shrieked.

“Stupefy.” Harry said calmly. Anne collapsed in a heap.

“What was that!” Sprout demanded when Harry had lowered his wand. Harry jumped, as if he had forgotten she was there. “Do you realize what you’ve just done?”

“I am not going back with that woman.” He said calmly. “You already know who I really am now. I’m not going back with the woman who gave birth to my parents’ betrayer.” He said that with narrowed eyes, very much resembling a snake, an angry snake.

“What?” McGonagall came a little closer. A similar whisper of a sound came from the air.

“Peter Pettigrew is still alive, or he is in my universe and I see no reason why he shouldn’t be here as well.” Harry said calmly. “He faked his own death and killed twelve Muggles in order to put my godfather, Sirius, in Azkaban. He was the one who betrayed my parents and let Voldemort into my home. He’s the reason my parents are dead.” His voice had taken on a neutral blankness. Sprout felt her heart constrict seeing the masked pain on her once-prized student’s face. No wonder he was so strong.

“Oh Harry.” She whispered and came a little closer. She paused by the body of Mrs. Pettigrew and frowned down at her. “We didn’t know any of this. Dumbledore only gave us a brief summary of what happened to you.”

“Even Dumbledore doesn’t know all the facts all the time.” Harry said scathingly. “It’s also partially his fault Sirius died. He made a very big mistake.”

“Which reminds me.” Hermione said sheepishly. “He wanted us to apologize for him again. And to say that you shouldn’t worry about the stuff you destroyed in his office.”

“You... destroyed his office?” McGonagall said incredulously. Snape too looked intrigued.

“Yes, and he deserved it.” Harry said in a low growl. “And when we get home, he can apologize for himself.” He paused and frowned down at the body of Mrs. Pettigrew. “Well, what do we do now?”

Chapter Thirty Five: Dealing with Danger

Voldemort found that he was bored almost immediately after having killed his counterpart.

He wasn't sure exactly why he was bored since commotion was all around him. The Death Eaters were finally listening to him and were preparing all kinds of wards and guards to stand at various locations of the house, not to mention bringing him all the Dailey Prophet copies they could find concerning the events of the past (never mind that the papers were generally quite biased and incorrect, the main events tended to remain the same). He had leafed through a couple, feeling only disgust when he saw the smirking face of one Neville Longbottom.

He remembered the boy from the Department of Mysteries. At least, that was the most recent meeting that came to mind. He also knew him, of course, because of the prophecy and because of his parents. They had been thorns in his side alongside the Potters for years before he finally had them taken care of. Bellatrix had been only too happy to torture them (the woman was quite amazing; she always loved torture).

As he mused about his next move, his gaze drifted to a loyal and adoring Bellatrix standing by his side, snapping at anyone who didn't look busy. Lucius stood at his other side, calm as you please. He was probably having some sort of therapy in his head, Voldemort could sense the rational voice in his mind telling him not to panic. Still, it was amusing to see the man controlling himself in the face of something so random as another Voldemort appearing out of nowhere and then killing someone who the strong-willed Malfoy had followed since Hogwarts.

The only thing that really surprised Voldemort was Wormtail. The little idiot was the only one who seemed to behave anything like his true Death Eaters. This did not mean that he was the usual, snivelling excuse for life that he was at home. Rather, he was stronger, darker, angrier too. Voldemort couldn't help but be fascinated by this turn of events. Perhaps Pettigrew really had killed Potter? After all, by the looks of the Dailey Prophet, there was absolutely nothing

extraordinary about him, nothing at all. This information could be useful.

“My lord?” Bellatrix said softly. Good, she hadn’t touched him. She was smart enough to remember his usual reaction when someone dared interrupt him with physical contact.

“Yes?” He said, turning to look at her.

“Sir, there are some dignitaries from the Ministry here to speak with you.” Voldemort’s eyebrows slowly went up.

“Ministry? What...” he paused and gave Bellatrix his full attention, “why would the Ministry be here? And more importantly, why would they be coming to me of all people, expecting to somehow be safe?” This was making less and less sense. What was going on?

“Sir...” Bellatrix looked completely thrown by his confusion, “sir, we work for the Ministry.” Voldemort continued giving her a blank stare.

“What do you mean, we work for the Ministry? You work for me. There’s quite a significant difference.” What the hell was going on? Voldemort felt confused, and when he was confused, he was angry, and when he was angry, he started killing people. “Explain this to me as if I have never been here, which I have not. Why is the Ministry here?”

“They are here, my lord, because you made a deal with them.” She said, as if she felt embarrassed talking about it. “They needed certain rebellious families out of the way, specifically those who were violent in regards to Muggle-born protests and so they hired you, in a sense. They pretend to look for you when you are actually under their protection.”

Voldemort stared at her as if she had grown a second head. “I’m afraid I don’t follow. Are you saying that I’ve been bought? I’m the Minister’s puppet? I kill who he wants me to kill?” Bellatrix, realizing that the tone of voice her master was using wasn’t exactly the most

desirable one when her life was at stake, nodded. "What about Neville Longbottom?"

"He was meant to live so we staged your death. The Ministry wanted a hero who supported them and so they used him. You were "brought back to life" because people were beginning to think there wasn't a threat anymore. You were in Romania before, researching potions and spells for Immortality." Voldemort continued staring at her.

"Yes, let them come in." He said at last, a dangerous smile forming on his face. Bellatrix nodded and moved away from him at last, sensing the wicked glint of an idea lurking behind his eyes.

It wasn't just a random Ministry official that entered Voldemort's War Room. It was the Minister himself, with a single Auror. The Auror, however, looked very bored as he followed the Minister. The little man looked rather annoyed and tired as he approached Voldemort. There was no fear in the little man.

Voldemort couldn't help feeling fascinated, watching the Minister approach him in such a fashion. He wondered what everyone would do if he just killed him right now... but now, the man could be useful. Best to wait and see what he wanted. Best to see what he was going to be asked to do. Best to see what he could use for ammunition later.

"Good evening, Tom." Fudge said as he came to stand in front of Voldemort's armchair. By reflex, Voldemort flexed his fingers around his wand. Oh, but how he hated his father's name. And his counterpart was stupid enough to let the man use it? What was the use in a name that was feared if no one feared it?

"Good evening, Minister." He said smoothly.

"We have a new target for you." The Minister said breezily as he snapped to his Auror. The Auror held out a cream colored parchment. Voldemort just stared at it. So, this was what it felt like to be a spy. Part of him was fascinated by the utter ridiculousness of this situation. He wanted to start laughing, but he knew that this joke could only get better and so he kept his face straight.

“Oh, do you? Who is it?” He said absently. He was having a calm, reasonable conversation with the Minister of Magic. He was not killing him. Oh Merlin, he was going to laugh so hard. He was actually worried that he would lose control and just start shaking with it.

“Who else?” The Minister said with a roll of his eyes. “I want the Potters and Black dead.” Voldemort’s eyebrows shot up.

“Oh? Are they still alive?”

“Of course they are.” Fudge said with a frustrated snort. He started pacing, pacing, in front of Voldemort’s armchair. “Every day we get reports of near hysteria! How could they have escaped Azkaban? Are they going to kill their son like they tried to before? What is the Ministry’s position if we can’t even capture three convicts? I need them dead, gone! And I need the Ministry to be the cause of it.” At this, he gave Voldemort a withering look. “I need you to do this quickly and quietly, no flashy shows like you’ve had to do with all the others. And I know when and where to send my Aurors.”

“You’re a mob boss.” Voldemort said, unable to stop himself.

“What?” Fudge’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “A... a what? Tom, are you feeling well?”

“Oh, I’m feeling quite well.” At this, he sent a sidelong glance at Lucius, who looked very calm. More calm than he should have been. Bellatrix, however, was betraying all of her emotions since neither the Auror nor the Minister were looking back her way. She had her face twisted into an expression her sister typically wore, that of having smelled something truly foul.

“You’re acting strange.” The Minister said, giving Tom a suspicious look. “You haven’t decided to join Dumbledore and reveal our little arrangement, have you? We had a deal.” Voldemort just stared at him. He couldn’t hold it anymore. He started laughing hysterically. Fudge stared at him.

“He’s not feeling entirely himself, tonight.” Lucius said as an explanation.

“Well, get a hold of yourself, man.” Fudge grunted. He was finally starting to look nervous. Voldemort finally managed to control himself though he couldn’t stop grinning at the Minister. He stood to his full height and stared down his nose at the Minister. “I want Potter in exchange.”

“What?” Fudge blinked stupidly up at him.

“I want the boy. I want Harry Potter.”

“Now see here, Tom.”

“That is Lord Voldemort to you.” He hissed this last part out. The room seemed to drop several degrees at this. The Auror was finally looking alert, fingering his wand.

“... Lord Voldemort.” Fudge said, really looking at him now. His attention was now, firmly, placed on him. Voldemort smirked grimly.

“I want the Potter boy here. I want him to be mine. Do you understand? I will kill your little targets with ease but I want payment.”

“You always get payment.” Fudge said grudgingly.

“I am telling you what I want. I was going to kill the others regardless.”

“Then why should I pay you a damned thing?” Fudge, quite suddenly, had the wand of the most terrible Dark Wizard at his throat. The Auror baulked and fumbled to get his wand out but Lucius and Bellatrix had him at wand point immediately.

“You will give me what I want.” Voldemort said softly. “You see, I am a changed man in many respects.” He came closer, his lips curving into a wicked, victorious smirk. “I only just recently arrived, you see.

Come, look behind my chair. There is something there I think you will find fascinating.” Fudge, finally, looked terrified.

“Tom, please, didn’t we work well together? Please don’t do this. We were good partners, weren’t we? I always paid you exactly what you wanted, didn’t I? We always had a deal. We always kept our deals, didn’t we? We were good together!” While he spoke, he was moving sideways. Voldemort was, after all, herding him.

“I wouldn’t know. Look behind my chair.” Fudge couldn’t look. He kept half-glancing and quickly turning his eyes back to the wand fearfully. “Look behind my chair.” Voldemort said this in a whisper. He flicked his wand and Fudge instantly ducked to look behind the chair before Voldemort could use a spell. And there he was. His counterpart lay face up, horror, shock, and anger on his face. Fudge screamed and leapt back.

The Auror was twisting his head, trying to see what the big deal was. Fudge ran behind the Auror looking as if he had seen his own mother there. Voldemort smirked as he came to sit back on his armchair, allowing his presence to spread to the rest of the room, letting the cold sink into their bones, even that of his Death Eaters. “Now you understand, I hope? I am not quite the same man I was before. I’m from out of town, you could say. Where I am from, I am not a hired killer. I do not work for the Ministry. I am the most feared man in the world. No one dares to so much as speak my name. And the only one who can, supposedly, kill me is the Potter boy. In fact, that is why I came here in the first place. I want him. I want to kill him. And you will bring him to me. And if you don’t, I’m sure your children would have no trouble convincing you.” And he grinned.

“My... my children?”

“Lucius, I want you to find the Minister’s house. I would like to have a little chat with his wife and children. And anyone else who happens to be in the house.”

“W-What!” The Minister’s eyes widened with fear. “This is... this is a joke, isn’t it? I must say, Tom, it isn’t very funny! Not very funny at all!”

“Oh, torture is quite amusing to me.” Voldemort followed with his eyes as Lucius hurried away to do as he had been told. “Who shall I play with first? Well, it all depends how many children you have. I’m sure I could come up with a little something. I haven’t done any good torture since I came here.”

“I-I’ll get you Potter!” Fudge said quickly.

“Oh please, I’m not quite so dense, Minister.” Voldemort leaned back, resting his cheek against his knuckles, smirking at him. “You’re quite obviously lying. I can read your mind, you see. Try again.” Fudge looked even more panicked.

“I will! I’ll get Potter for you! I’ll even get Longbottom if you want him!”

“I don’t want that weakling. Only Potter is even worth the effort. Bring him to me.” He was losing patience now. He glanced at the Auror by Fudge’s side. “Your name.”

“Peter Kengly.” The man said softly.

“You understand, I believe.” Voldemort said softly, staring into the man’s eyes. “I want Potter. I want you to go to Hogwarts and tell him that I am here. There is a small possibility that he already knows that I am here, no doubt through his little scar. I want you to go to the castle and I want you to speak to him and only him. You know how to more or less block Legilimancy, I see. You will use it at the school to prevent Dumbledore from peeking into your thoughts. I want you to find Harry Potter and tell him that I have the Minister and that I have sent him a challenge. He will understand and he will come.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Peter was staring at him blankly. Oh, he was good at his job. No wonder the Minister had only brought him instead of a small army.

“He will come. He always does.” Voldemort stood and walked towards them. “Bellatrix, come here.” The two men looked behind them in confusion as Bellatrix, equally perplexed but hiding it well, came forward. “Give me your arm.”

Now she understood. Rolling her sleeve up to the elbow, she exposed the Mark to him. He pressed his wand to the mark and let the pressure of it build. Bellatrix gritted her teeth but didn't make a sound.

“You see, I paid him a little visit. I marked him, in fact. He will feel this pain and he will know, once and for all, that my challenge is meant for him. I wish for you to inform him that the Minister is mine. I want him to suffer, you see.” And he began to dig his wand into the mark, finally making Bellatrix cry out and fall to her knees, agony in every little cry that escaped her trembling mouth.

“Go now and give him my challenge.” And Voldemort finally released Bellatrix. She sobbed and fell back, panting hard as she cradled her arm. Cradled it like a child.

“How do you know I won't go to the Ministry and just get reinforcement to take you down?” Fudge looked as if he wanted to strike the man. Voldemort merely smirked. The Auror had, after all, not been able to block the thought, so voicing it only served as a redundancy.

“There is no reinforcement strong enough in the world to stop me.”

Evans stood overlooking the lake, letting his eyes wander over the placid water, reflecting the sun into his eyes. He loved this time of year when he could do this. It was cold, true, but it was also beautiful. The sun would soon be hidden away by the clouds and so these days were precious.

“You're going to freeze to death.” Snape said from behind him. Evans didn't look away.

“Are you going to thaw me out?”

“No, I’ll leave you here. And you know I will.” Snape said. Evans chuckled.

“I see that your devotion knows no bounds.”

“I want to go back inside.”

“Then go on. No one’s stopping you.”

“You’re stopping me, you insufferable prat. Get inside before I have to drag you in.”

“With those skinny arms of yours? Sorry, Severus, no go.”

“Stop being a pain and stop staring off into space.”

“I don’t think Harry knows about the deal between the Ministry and Voldemort.” Evans said this very quietly. Snape moved closer but didn’t say anything, just staring out at the water with him. The giant squid waved at them. “It doesn’t make sense. It wouldn’t make sense. He wouldn’t know.”

“How could he not know?”

“Because he’s too pure. He doesn’t know a damned thing that’s going on. I think, in his world, Voldemort isn’t a con-artist at all. I don’t think he’s a hired assassin. He’s a stone-cold killer who honestly kills everyone he wants. And Harry is in the middle of it. There is no danger. It wasn’t like with Neville and the supposed Chamber of Secrets. If they hadn’t gotten a hold of the Weasley girl and modified her Memories, it would have gotten out. But the way Harry described it, it really happened. Ginny Weasley really did almost die. And Harry is a real hero, not a show-dog like Neville. He’s really, truly, a hero.” The last word was said in a reverent whisper.

“You’ve been out in the cold too long.” Snape grunted at him. “Let’s get inside and talk about this where it’s warmer and your brain has time to defrost before you try spewing more pearls of wisdom.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Evans smirked at him as they headed back into the castle. “Finally, you got to punch Potter. Even though it was a mistake.”

“Shut up, won’t you?” Snape growled at him.

Chapter Thirty Six: Tumbling into Chaos

Draco Malfoy only had to wait an hour or so. He didn't understand why everyone was treating him so lightly. He had almost just killed Potter and brought the Dark Lord to Hogwarts through the Boy Who Lived. They thought locking him in one of the dungeons was going to somehow make him less dangerous? Stupid, truly stupid. He was a Slytherin; didn't that suggest that he, maybe, possibly, knew his way around the secret passages in the area?

It was a simple tap of his wand to a brick and a passage opened up. It was a tight, cramped area, only big enough for very thin children to pass. Draco was not a child anymore but he had been starved for a bit and so he had only minimal discomfort in sliding through the passage. He ignored the cobwebs and dust that collected on his robes and only grunted when a particularly rough stone scraped his hand. Once free, he shook himself clean and smoothed his hair back.

Alright, he had to find a way to contact the master. The Mark on his arm had burned terribly, signaling that the Dark Lord had completed his part of the plan (not that Draco ever had a doubt in his mind that he wouldn't). He opened the door to the supply closet he had been directed to and walked resolutely out into the waiting corridor.

He walked right into a group of Gryffindor and Ravenclaws heading towards class. Cursing his own luck, he sneered at them and tried to get away from them as quickly as he could. After a moment of walking, he sensed someone following behind him. When he cast a quick glance back, a flash of red hair caught his attention and he frowned, turning completely around to face... Ginny Weasley. Ginerva Weasley. She was the runt of the Weasley family, the only girl.

"What do you want?" He demanded with a sneer, trying to steady his shaking hands by stuffing them into his pockets. It wouldn't do to look as crazy as he felt just then. Draco, relax. You're a Malfoy. You are the Dark Lord's right hand. Calm. He squared his shoulders and arched an eyebrow as she hesitantly moved closer to him.

“I know we’re not supposed to acknowledge each other when we’re around other students, but you didn’t even see me.” She said, a teasing smile tilting her lips. The single inquisitory eyebrow rose higher on Draco’s forehead.

“Excuse me?” She rolled her eyes and flipped her hair at him.

“Fine fine, play along. Merlin, you can be such a prat sometimes, Malfoy.”

“Aren’t I always?” This really was a question but Ginny laughed as if he was making a joke.

“No, you’re not always a prat, just most of the time. No one’s around, you don’t have to keep playing around. Actually, I was hoping that you’d help me find Harry.”

“Why’s that? Are you meeting him for a date?” He was falling into his role easily. The Dark Lord had warned him early on to prepare for completely ludicrous situations such as this one. He would never have spoken to Ginny, ever, under any circumstances, except in a derogatory way. She was speaking to him in quite a different way than anyone had ever talked to him.

“Of course not a date, you prat.” And she rolled her eyes at him. “I wanted to know when we were going to practice DA classes later.” Draco felt his eyes widen even though he hadn’t meant to show emotion.

“DA classes? He’s teaching them?”

“I hope he is.” She said, pulling at her hair. She was looking at him strangely. “Are you feeling okay? You don’t look well.” She paused and frowned at him. “You’re shaking.”

“Am I? Sorry, I’m a bit cold.” Draco tried to force his body to stop trembling but it refused to do so. “Should we go look for Potter?”

“Yes, but only if you stop referring to him like that.” She rolled her eyes again. “It doesn’t make sense that you two keep up that pathetic charade.” And then she took his hand and started pulling him away from the dungeons. He wanted to shake her off but he didn’t, letting her pull him. It would probably seem strange to her if he acted in a strange way and he wasn’t sure if pulling his arm away from her constituted as strange behavior. He knew that in this case, passive was far more helpful than aggressive.

They walked in silence for a while until Ginny turned her probing eyes back to him again. “You really must be cold.” She said. She squeezed his hand.

“The dungeons can do that.” He said as calmly as he could. He found looking straight ahead helped keep him from feeling too strange. “I should buy gloves and wear them.”

“Because that wouldn’t look strange at all.” She teased. She then turned a brilliant smile his way and dragged him up the stairs and towards the Great Hall. Her entire attitude was really starting to freak him out. Honestly, what was she doing? Wasn’t she supposed to hate him? He hated her. That was the natural order of things. He felt himself growing increasingly more uncomfortable. She released his hand then but walked close to him, continuously giving him strange looks. “What’s wrong? Really, you’re starting to scare me.”

“I’m fine.” He said, making sure not to answer too quickly. He smiled at her, forcing it, in hopes of reassuring her. He was wondering where he could drag her and knock her out so that she wouldn’t draw attention to him. Maybe he could even use her as a hostage? Even better, she could bring him straight to Potter.

“Hey, Gin!” Draco froze at the voice from behind them and, again, cursed his luck. Today was just not his day. Ronald Weasley and Neville Longbottom both came jogging towards them. Draco tried to escape and pretend he had just been walking in the same direction as Ginny but she grabbed his arm and held him in place. He could already sense the danger.

“Sod off, Malfoy.” Weasley growled when he arrived.

“I would, if your sister would get off me.” Draco said, arching an eyebrow at the twerp. Longbottom was giving him a mean look that had absolutely no affect on him. What the hell did he think he was doing anyway?

“Ron, stop being an ass.” Ginny said, rolling her eyes at her brother. “We’re looking for Harry. Have you seen him?” Weasley shifted uncomfortably at the mention of Potter. Ah, Weasley knew. He was aware that Potter was not who he said he was. Draco smirked internally as he realized this. No wonder he looked as if he had been forced to drink one of Longbottom’s potions.

“I really don’t know where he is.” Weasley finally blurted out. Suddenly, he made a choking sound and pushed Ginny and Draco apart. “Hey! Get your hands off my sister!” Draco stumbled and regained his balance. He bared his teeth and prepared to punch the sodding Weasel but Longbottom suddenly moved forward and tried to punch him instead. Draco jerked back and growled, slamming his fist against Longbottom’s left eye.

Longbottom screamed and fell back on his arse, staring up at Draco, shock and surprise spreading across his obnoxious face. Weasley and Ginny stared at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Draco shook his fist lightly and arched an eyebrow at them. “You never could fight, Longbottom.” Weasley got over his stupor at last and went charging towards Draco but he was jerked back when Ginny grabbed her brother’s arms and pulled. He lost balance and went tumbling over his own feet, knocking himself out against the wall. Ginny’s eyes widened and she gasped, looking horrified.

“Oh Merlin, what did I just do!” She whispered. She too started shaking. Draco grunted in appreciation of her handiwork and moved forward, grabbing her wrist.

“Let’s go.” He said simply. She started to follow him in a daze, staring behind them as Longbottom whimpered and scrambled away from them and ran down the hall as fast as his legs could carry him.

“How am I supposed to introduce you to my family now?” She mumbled. Draco paused and looked back at her.

“What?”

“How am I supposed to introduce you to my family?” Ginny said, looking up at him helplessly. “How am I going to tell them that my boyfriend beats up Neville and Ron on a daily basis and that you got me to help you this time?” And then she blushed prettily. “How am I supposed to tell them that I snog the son of my dad’s rival as often as I can?” Draco felt his shaking stop. He felt his eyebrows shoot straight up into his hair. He also felt insane laughter bubble up in his chest that shook him until he had to let go of her hand, holding his sides as he laughed and laughed and laughed.

Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end for a moment but he shook off the feeling. He didn’t want to have to think about anything bad right now. He just wanted to watch his parents sleep. It was very relaxing, watching their chests slowly rise and fall, his father cradling his mother tightly against his chest, Sirius snoring softly and making whining sounds every once in a while. He kept his back towards Ann Pettigrew, who was snoring on her back, her face still pale from when she had been conscious and loud.

Running a hand through his hair, Harry felt desperation and helplessness take over. What was he supposed to do now? He had only just found his family and he was supposed to go back home? And Voldemort was here. Didn’t that mean he had an obligation to kill him? Didn’t that mean he had to stay? If he didn’t, Voldemort would just kill everyone, including his parents and Sirius. Again.

He stood and left the Hospital Wing, trusting that they would be safe behind the special barriers Evans and Snape had erected over that of Madame Pomphrey. She, of course, knew exactly who was being housed in her Hospital Wing. She, however, had her own priorities and orders from Dumbledore to keep the criminals safe, at least for now.

As he walked with his hands in his pockets, Harry thought of nothing. He was exhausted. Now, after all that had happened, research into Ancient Runes seemed totally ridiculous since Ron and Hermione had come to get him. What had he learned, anyway? How could he use anything he had learned here? What was so important about here?

So, maybe his mind wasn't so empty after all.

He sighed and rounded the corner and was surprised to find Draco heading right towards him. He stopped and frowned, suspicion showing on his face. "Draco?"

"There you are! I was looking for you." He smiled as he came closer. Harry slowly relaxed. No, this wasn't Malfoy. Malfoy was locked away, safely, somewhere in the dungeons. Snape had assured him that he would watch over Malfoy, with his customary eye roll at Harry's insistence that Malfoy was more dangerous than he appeared. "I was hoping to find you walking around somewhere, probably getting yourself into trouble."

"I don't think I'll be having DA classes for a while." Harry said with an apologetic smile. He knew, of course, why Draco would be looking for him. Draco's face fell and he shrugged.

"Ah, well, Ginny was really looking forward to it and she asked me to ask you. Hey, are you okay? You look a little under the weather." Harry sighed and ruffled his hair, making it messier, if possible.

"I've been having a rough day, that's all. I don't know when we'll have more classes but it may be unlikely. Things are starting to get complicated." Draco arched an eyebrow.

"Complicated how?"

"Complicated bad. A certain... old acquaintance of mine has dropped by to check up on me."

"Oh, you mean your mum? Ann Pettigrew?"

“No, but she’s pretty bad too.” Harry grimaced. “I meant another certain someone. He’s far less welcome and he knows it, the smug bastard.” He rubbed his scar gently, easing the slight pain. Draco’s eyes flickered up and widened when he saw what he was doing.

“So this wouldn’t be a good time for you to be walking around at night, giving a Slytherin and an outcasted Gryffindor lessons. I mean, it’s dangerous enough with your parents and Sirius Black out of Azkaban.”

“Funny story, that.” Harry opened his mouth to ask Draco if he would please let him just walk and clear his mind, when someone squeaked and came running towards him. Harry immediately felt stupid for thinking he would have a moment’s rest. It was the universe’s mission in life to make things complicated for him. Neville barely managed to stop himself as he leaned over his legs, breathing hard.

“H-Harry! Come quick!” And then he gasped when he saw Draco glaring at him. He squeaked and pointed a shaking finger at him. “H-How... but I just... but you were!” And he swooned. Harry quickly grabbed him and shook him.

“Neville, what happened? Talk to me!” Neville jerked back to reality, staring wide-eyed at Harry.

“It’s impossible, Harry! I just saw him! I just saw Malfoy! H-he punched me!” Harry frowned as he looked at the hysterical Neville. Indeed, a black eye was forming on his left side. “He an-and Ginny knocked out Ron! And I had to find someone, a-a teacher! Harry, he’s gone crazy! He just went crazy!” And as he said this, he was pointing at Draco again.

“What the hell are you talking about, Longbottom? I’ve been here this whole time.” Draco said with an arched eyebrow.

“But I saw you! It was you! It was you! I saw you!”

“You must have been mistaken.”

“I swear to Merlin it was you!”

“Calm down, Neville.” Harry said very quietly. Both Neville and Draco looked at Harry. “Both of you are right. Where did he go? Did you see?”

“He was going towards the entrance.” Neville said weakly, confusion mixing with his terror now. “You believe me, don’t you?”

“Yes, I believe you.”

“Well, I think you’re both bonkers.” Draco said with a growl. “I’ve been here this whole bloody time and you’re going to say that I haven’t?” He glared at Harry as he said this. The hurt and betrayal were hard to see, but they were there.

“It’s a long story.” Harry said with a tired sigh. “But I know that you’re both right. We have to go after him. He’s an imposter.” That was the only thing that would work right now. He couldn’t come up with a better lie until later. He certainly couldn’t get into the complicated truth when Ginny (and possibly Ron) were in trouble. “Neville, you have to go tell Dumbledore that Malfoy escaped. He’ll understand that it’s not Draco.” He nodded to Draco as he opened his mouth to protest. “And Draco, I need you to go to the Hospital Wing. You’ll find Ron and Hermione there. Yes, Neville, I know you said Ron was just knocked out. Draco will see them there when he goes.” Now Neville and Draco were both staring at him strangely.

“Longbottom can go running to the teachers all he wants. I’m going with you. You’re going after him, aren’t you?” Draco had his face set. Curiosity was also dawning in his eyes, a dangerous emotion, Harry assessed.

“No, I need you to get these people. It’s important.” As he spoke, he started towards the entrance. “They’ll understand the seriousness of this situation.”

“Was he a Death Eater?” Neville whispered as he hurried to keep step with Harry. “He was, wasn’t he? And he’s got Ginny!”

“Yes, he’s a Death Eater.” The color drained out of Draco’s face at the severity in Harry’s voice. He quickened his pace.

“I’m coming with you. You can’t stop me!”

“Look, you’ll get in the way! I don’t know what’ll happen if you two get close together. He’s taken your identity. He might kill you to keep it up!”

“I don’t care. I’m going.”

“Harry, don’t trust him.” Neville was glaring at Draco as the three hurried past the Great Hall and towards the double doors leading to the Hogwarts grounds. “He’s a Death Eater too! It’s a trick!”

“How would you know, Longbottom?” Draco growled.

“Both of you shut it. If you’re going to help me, I need you two to work together.” Harry started running. Draco and Neville hurried to follow him. Neville had trouble keeping up but he didn’t complain, only quickening his stride and breathing hard to keep up. Harry stared ahead of him. There was a shock of red and white, dashing into the Forbidden Forest. Both suddenly vanished and something constricted in Harry’s throat. No, a voice whispered in his head, no, he couldn’t! He used a bloody Portkey? How the hell did he get a hold of one? Harry tried to run faster, taking out his wand. This was going to get complicated, he knew.

When he reached the spot where the two had vanished, he scowled down at the floor. There was no real sign of a struggle. Ginny had willingly gone with Malfoy, probably because she didn’t realize the danger. Harry frowned over at Draco who was, he was surprised to note, looking more and more worried. No, not worried... he was starting to look half hysterical and panicked. He had missed something crucial.

“It’s not use, they’re already gone. We have to go back and talk to Dumbledore about this. Fast. Ginny’s in real danger.”

“What can we do? We’re just students.” Neville looked around nervously, still trying to catch his breath from the sprint across the Hogwarts grounds.

“I know exactly why he took her. To get to me.” Harry said, staring into the forest in the hopes of seeing their tell-tale hair. Maybe they hadn’t left after all? Maybe Ginny was safe. Maybe this sinking feeling of dread was just the normal anxiety of Voldemort being near him again.

“Mr. Potter?” Harry, Neville and Draco turned to find a tall man behind them. On his chest he wore the insignia of the Aurors. The dread only heightened. “You are Harry Potter, are you not?” The man came closer. In his hand he held an old boot, drooping from the weight of itself. Harry straightened his back and stared into the man’s eyes.

“Yes, I’m Harry Potter.”

“My name is Peter Kengly. I’ve been sent by…” and now he paused, frowning. “You’re bleeding. Are you alright?” Harry grunted and ran a hand over his forehead, smearing blood from his scar onto his hand. It looked even worse now but his bangs covered most of it.

“Yes, I’m fine. What do you want?” Peter Kengly continued staring at his forehead for a long moment before his eyes snapped down into Harry’s irritated ones.

“I’ve been sent by Lord Voldemort. He wanted me to say that he has set a challenge for you. He has the Minister of Magic and he wants you to come get him.” Neville squeaked and threatened to swoon again but Draco stomped on his foot. Harry stared at him for a long moment and sighed.

“I was wondering when the bastard was going to do something stupid like that.”

Chapter Thirty Seven: Ministry Red Tape

Ginny's eyes opened before she was fully conscious. As she looked around, she was conscious of someone staring at her, though for what purpose, she wasn't sure. As she became aware of herself, she slowly sat up and looked around. She was immediately aware of the cold and the bars on the window. The furnishings in the room were Spartan in nature, with a plain wooden desk to one corner and a vanity off beside a large black wardrobe.

Draco Malfoy sat on the edge of her bed, his eyes distant and cold. When he noticed that she was awake, a wide grin spread over his face. "Good to see you're finally awake, Weasley. I was starting to think I'd hit you too hard."

"Why didn't..." she paused, licking her dry lips, "why didn't you just use a Stunning spell on me?" He looked extremely amused by her question.

"Where's the fun in that?" He levitated a tray with food and a goblet of water. "You'll be seeing my Master fairly soon so I expect you to be presentable. We're also going to deal with several of the unpleasant members of your universe while you're up." He wrinkled his nose. "I don't know how you stand it."

"Stand what?" Ginny muttered, rubbing the back of her head. She was still not quite sure what was going on. She was aware that Draco was with her, she was aware that her head was aching, and she was aware that she should be scared. But she wasn't. She was somewhat fascinated by the whole turn of events.

"Don't you worry about it." Draco said in a leisurely voice. He's making fun of me, Ginny realized with a hint of irritation. And maybe a little curiosity too.

"Where am I?" Ginny tried instead.

"An undisclosed location in an undisclosed town. We wouldn't want you blabbing to Potter in case you get away now do we?"

“Well what’s the good in keeping me around if you’re not even going to tell me anything?” And then she added, almost without thinking, “It’s not as if anyone would believe me anyway.”

“Potter not believe you?” Draco’s eyebrows slowly went up. He looked cute confused, Ginny noted with a slight trembling in her heart. She tried to stay focused but her mind was wondering to some things about Draco other than his obvious detachment from reality. She suddenly drew herself up short. Something terrible happened to him and I’ve got my mind in the gutter! Come on, Gin, stop being so useless!

“Well, I’ll admit he believes me now because of where he’s from and all, but no one else would believe anything I have to say.”

“And why’s that?” He leaned towards her, resting his chin against his palm as he stared at her without a hint of modesty – typical Draco. Ginny felt herself starting to blush but she fought down the urge to shrink back and frowned at him.

“You know very well why.” She looked around slowly. “Because of the Chamber, of course.”

“Why don’t you refresh my memory?”

“What’ll you give me?” Ginny said. Draco’s lips twitched the way they always did when he was amused.

“Well, I could refrain from killing you right now.”

“As if you would.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“I’ve seen you with your cat. You can’t be that bad.”

Draco made an exasperated snorting sound. "What the hell is up with that? How much of a damned coward do I have to be to fawn all over some cat Potter sent me? It's enough to make me want to kill myself."

"I think it's adorable." Ginny said firmly.

"You would." Draco said, reclining in his seat. "I can't believe I'm such a... a..." Ginny couldn't help feeling surprised. Draco was never one to scramble for words. Was he really so flustered that he couldn't think of a word bad enough for his supposed poor behavior?

"As I said, I think it's adorable."

"Weasley, if you don't stop calling me adorable, I'll think you like me or something." Draco said amusedly.

"What makes you think I don't like you?"

"Well, for starters, I'm not the Draco Malfoy from your universe. I'm from the same place Potter's from." Draco said. He leaned forward, staring at her face.

"Sure you are." Ginny said, frowning. "You almost had me convinced. Except that we've done this before."

"We've done... what before?" Draco demanded, leaning even closer.

"Well, we've left school together before." Ginny said, feeling a tiny seed of irritation taking hold of her. Normally Draco didn't bother her, not to say that Draco wasn't annoying. He was plenty annoying. Thing was, Ginny was a bit smarter than him, and more patient. She could usually stay a few steps ahead of him when it came to making jokes and poking fun at the other (especially in front of the other Gryffindors and Slytherins). Suddenly, being in front of him now, she felt strangely... lesser. He had never been intimidated by her, but he'd always had respect for her. The way Draco was looking at her now, she didn't recognize it. There wasn't respect in it. Just curiosity.

“Go on.” Draco said.

“Er, what?”

Patiently, he said “You said we’ve left school together before. Tell me more.”

“Why? You were there.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Okay.” Ginny said. She felt herself start to blush again and scowled at herself. What was wrong with her? She’d never felt this flustered around Draco before. They’d snogged tons of times and he’d nearly seen her naked that one time (it was an accident, but not an unpleasant one) but here he was just looking at her, and not even in a sexual way, and she was acting like a complete weirdo! She resolved not to let him bother her. She resolved this by staring at the wall just over his right ear.

“Well, it was during a really sunny day at Hogwarts. I was studying for a Charms test and you snuck into the Gryffindor tower. My roommates were in the Great Hall so it was just me. You went up and just said, ‘Let’s get out of here, I can’t take it anymore.’ And then we snuck first into Hogsmeade and then we went to this little Muggle stop you somehow knew about and we took a car. You didn’t know how to drive one since your dad is so anti-Muggle but I did so I drove us. We didn’t drive too long, it wasn’t even much of an escape or anything, but we went to this little meadow and I taught you how to drive.” At this, Ginny felt herself grinning. “You were determined to get it right. You almost drove us off a cliff because you didn’t know how to stop and you kept hitting the accelerator.” Ginny giggled. “And then when you could finally drive somewhat well, you insisted you drive back to the spot we’d gotten it from and so we ended up missing dinner. You didn’t care though. You took me to the kitchens as if you’d planned to skip dinner the whole time. You got the house elves to make us our own private feast. You said you’d take me farther away next time we did that.” And now she finally looked at him.

“So I know you can’t be telling the truth. About not being who I know you are.”

He was looking at her very oddly.

“I cannot believe how stupid I am in this universe.” He said, fascinated. “And I didn’t try to take advantage of you or anything? Please don’t tell me I didn’t at least try to feel you up. Because if I didn’t, I’m going to fear the worst and say that I’m probably homosexual.”

“You’re not!” Ginny growled, immediately angry. It wasn’t the suggestion so much as his insistence that if he was dating her, it meant he had to be gay. What the hell was this?

It wasn’t that she was homophobic. Of course she wasn’t. Percy was bisexual and the family had been suspecting Charlie for a while now but... well, that didn’t mean her boyfriend had the... the right to turn gay! Wait... what was she even talking about? He hadn’t said he was gay. He was being sarcastic.

He seemed to know exactly what she’d been thinking because he had the most horrendous smirk on his face. Ginny glared at him.

“Start being crazy again, I like you better when you’re trying to kill me.”

“Ah, I will soon, don’t you worry about that.” He said with a lazy smirk. “It’s just too easy to infuriate you.”

“Shut up, Malfoy.”

The door opened then and someone poked their head into the room. Ginny felt her skin crawl, just a little, when she saw that it was Bellatrix Lestrange. She’d seen wanted pictures of her all over Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley after she and some other Death Eaters had escaped from Azkaban. Seeing her now, in the flesh, made her start to realize that maybe Draco was telling the truth and he really was planning to kill her or do something like that.

Well, she could handle it. Ginny set her chin and began reminding herself, over and over, of the things she had gone through in the Chamber of Secrets. She had very nearly died. If Neville hadn't come and rescued her life, she would have died. Not only that, she may have ended up killing someone this time. Harry had told her it hadn't been her fault before, that she had been possessed, but she couldn't suppress the guilt that overwhelmed her just remembering the things she had done. She could still remember strangling Hagrid's roosters and speaking Parseltongue to the sink in Myrtle's bathroom, crawling in the muck and over animal bones as she went to see the Basilisk. She remembered never to look directly into its eyes lest she die instantly, but she remembered seeing huge hunks of its body as it slithered around her, always delighted to see her, always eager to go slithering in the pipes.

She shuddered, remembering its eager desire to rip and tear people. Deep inside her, she felt the familiar yank of Tom. He was still there, somewhere inside her head. He had been strangely quietly ever since Harry had shown up. She remembered a time when he would torment her dreams, persuading her and pleading with her to do things, to find things out for him. It was primarily because of him that she had become so reclusive, avoiding friends and groups of people, even refusing to read the Dailey Prophet in case something set him off. It wasn't until Harry came along and introduced her to Draco that things had changed.

"- and he tried to run so the Dark Lord had him placed under Cruciatus and now he can't walk." Bellatrix was saying. Ginny blinked and shook herself, angry that she had missed something.

"I should have expected the coward to run." Draco said, looking smug. "Never mind. He won't try it again, even if he could walk. Master always knows how to pound any sort of rebellion out of the people he meets."

"I see." Bellatrix glanced at Ginny and then looked around. She wanted to ask something, that much was obvious, but she couldn't seem to bring herself to say whatever was on her mind.

“What is it?” Draco finally asked when he couldn’t contain his curiosity. Except, of course, he didn’t say it impatiently. He said it in a drawling voice, as if it didn’t matter what she had to say. Bellatrix looked directly at him and frowned. She wasn’t accustomed to Draco (or anyone, for that matter) speaking quite that way.

“It’s just strange, to see the Dark Lord behaving the way he does. His ambitions were never exactly... the same.” She struggled to find the words. “Our actions were always more of a show than real. We made threats, we tortured some and killed some, but it seems so minimal compared to some of the stories he’s told us.”

“What do you expect?” Draco drawled. “He went all the way. He did everything he swore he would. That is, except for kill Potter. But that will come later.” He smirked.

“Why would You-Know-Who want to kill Harry?” The words were out of Ginny’s mouth before she could stop them. Draco and Bellatrix both looked at her.

“Don’t you know?” Draco asked. He said it patiently, as if he were speaking to a child.

“I don’t know why he would, unless he were...” and she stopped, really thinking about all she had heard so far. Draco from Harry’s universe, the Dark Lord acting strangely and... and then it made sense. “Oh Merlin.” Ginny whispered.

“She’s smarter than she looks.” Bellatrix said in amusement.

“Don’t go jumping to conclusions.” Draco said. He stood and made his way to the door. “Coming Weasley? It’s best not to keep the Master waiting.” Ginny stood up mechanically, her mind racing. She knew she was in danger, more danger than the Chamber. Was she going to be murdered?

The fear took hold of her so tightly that she suddenly couldn’t move, could barely breathe. She was going to die. She was going to be

murdered. Oh God, he wasn't like anyone here, he was powerful like Harry. He was powerful like Draco. Only, he was even more than that because he was the Dark Lord!

She suddenly remembered how it felt to be in the Room of Requirement with Harry as he taught. His aura would expand as he explained something to her and Draco, his eyes would flash, his magic would be so strong. She remembered the way that he just seemed to come alive, how the room would come alive around him. And the fear became even worse as she realized that she was about to meet the anti-Harry, the evil to his good, the root of evil in a world far stronger than her own. And somehow she knew that the Dark Lord would have something much more creative than death in mind for her. Would he torture her? She thought she knew what torture was, she had always thought she could handle anything after the Chamber of Secrets, but did she really know what it meant to be tortured to the point of insanity? Did she really have the courage to keep her mouth shut?

"Weasley." Draco said impatiently. He watched her and, slowly, realized that she was having a panic attack. "Hey Weasley, calm down." He said, his eyebrows arching up in surprise.

She didn't answer. Instead, she fell to her knees, gasping for breath and gripping the edge of the bed beside her. She started to black out, so intense was her terror, before two strong arms jerked her upright and someone slapped her, hard. She jerked back, staring up into Draco's furious face.

"Save your energy for the Dark Lord." Draco growled. "There's no fun in killing yourself." He started dragging her towards the door. Terror took hold of Ginny again and she dug her heels into the carpet, digging her nails into his wrist and trying to jerk out of his grip. It was suddenly necessary, imperative even, to get away from Draco. She couldn't, she just could not, face the Dark Lord.

Draco growled and ignored her nails. He dragged her from the room, kicking and screaming.

Leonardo Langdy sat behind his desk, his quill scratching at a yellowing parchment with green ink, scritch scritch, scritch scritch, dip, plop, scritch scritch. He was sending a note of complaint to the Minister of Magic. He was requesting that the Ministry stop trying to send interns to the Department of Mysteries since these innocent (and sometimes not-so-innocent) youths had a habit of disappearing after a few days, usually after fooling around with some of the more dangerous doors. He was requesting that the Minister please consider, for the sake of all parties included and present during these proceedings, begging the Minister's pardon, that these youths find other departments in which to practice their obviously useful skills. The Department of Mysteries was a serious and full-time commitment that interns were not generally prepared to deal with.

Feeling satisfied with himself, Leonardo (Leon to his friends) rose from his desk and moved towards the doorway. Opening his office door, he moved out and down the hallway towards the lift that would take him to the Minister's main office. He would hand deliver his message and make sure an owl couldn't "accidentally" not reach the Minister. It was ridiculous, how much the Ministry ignored the Department of Mysteries sometimes. It was, after all, the main reason the Ministry had been construed in the first place.

As he walked, he felt the strange sensation of being followed. Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed something quite strange. Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was leading a group of five students and Minerva McGonagall. Three of the boys were easily recognizable. Ronald Weasley, son of Arthur Weasley, had the tell-tale fiery red hair typical of his lineage. Beside him was Neville Longbottom, the Boy Who Lived (everyone, even a sheltered Untouchable from the Department of Mysteries, knew that). And, of course, there was Draco Malfoy, though why he was with this strange assortment of companions, he didn't know. As for the other two teenagers, he was fairly sure that one of them was important somehow. He certainly walked in a way that suggested importance. He couldn't put his finger on a name, though.

"Good day, Albus! Minerva, you're looking splendid today." Leon said happily as he slowed his pace to wait for them. He liked Albus

and Minerva. They were smarter than most of the Ministry workers (at least the ones in positions of power) and they were great sources of information. Leon, being the head of the Department of Mysteries, didn't get out much. That and they always gave him the impression of knowing more than they let on. And, being the head of the Department of Mysteries, Leon was always fond of mysteries.

"Leon, how are you?" Albus said pleasantly as he continued walking. Leon quickly kept stride with him, grinning.

"As good as can be. What has you at the Ministry today? No bad news, I hope. We already have enough of that going around with those escaped-," and he paused as it came to him. The boy, the boy he hadn't been able to place... Potter. Harry Potter. Son of Lily and James Potter. Oh, this would have gotten awkward had he finished his thought. "Well, things have been busy. What do you need?"

"I'm afraid we do have a bit of a crisis." Albus said apologetically. "I would love to stay and chat. Unfortunately, we have to meet some Aurors immediately."

"Oh, of course! I had no idea it was that serious." Leon's mind raced, curiosity threatening to overtake him. How he wanted to know what was going on! He started following them, despite his better judgment. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't think so, my old friend." Albus said with a small smile. "There are forces at work that, I am afraid to say, will have little to do with the Department of Mysteries."

The Potter boy perked up and stopped walking altogether. Strangely, everyone else did as well and gave him a funny look. "You're in the Department of Mysteries?" He demanded, arching an incredulous eyebrow. Leon frowned.

"I am the head of the department." He said, feeling no small amount of pride consume him. And why not? He was proud of who he was! He had earned his position, and without any help from anybody. The Department of Mysteries was usually ignored in the political arena

since there was nothing about it that dictated social policy, specifically because the department was, as its name implied, mysterious.

“Has anyone tried to break into the Hall of Prophecy recently?” The boy demanded. Leon felt the blood drain out of his face and collect around his toes.

“How... how do you know about that?” He said in a soft whisper.

“I just do, that’s not important. Has anyone tried to take a prophecy from the Hall?” Harry Potter. That was the boy’s name wasn’t it? Leon felt himself swell protectively.

“Mr. Potter, I don’t think that’s really any of your business-,”

“Leon, it is important.” Albus suddenly said. Leon turned to glare at him but found that Albus too looked a little curious about Harry’s answer. Professor McGonagall was looking flat-out confused by the whole situation. Well, he was all for learning something new, but there was more than one reason the Department was mysterious. Unspeakables were not meant to be spoken to or to speak of their work.

“The Hall of Prophecy holds a lot of... painful memories for my friends and me.” Harry said carefully. “This may sound ridiculous, but we were in there once, in the Hall of Prophecy. We saw a prophecy and some rather nasty things happened. I just want to make sure that nothing like that ever happens again.”

Leon opened his mouth to protest but the words died in his throat. The look in the boy’s eyes... it was so serious. He wasn’t lying, he was certain of that. Leon frowned, considering his options. He could certainly tell them, couldn’t he? It may help him more than hurt him, after all. He was up against a wall right now and just letting the confusion wash over him would not help anyone, most especially him.

“There have been strange incidents in the Department recently.” Leon finally acquiesced. “The cabinet filled with Time-turners mysteriously started shattering and repairing itself, over and over.

The prophecies within in the hall started spontaneously exploding, some all at once and others at strange times. We don't know what to make of it but we've been handling it." He couldn't help adding the last part. Unlike the sluggish inefficiency of the rest of the Ministry, the Department of Mysteries secretly prided itself on being up-to-speed and quick when decisions were made. They didn't have to wait for higher-up orders before they could act.

"As I thought." Hermione said, biting on her thumb nail. "We're influencing this universe with our proximity to it. It's very likely that the two may merge completely. The seams dividing us are slowly unraveling."

"Thank you for your help," Harry said. He looked to Dumbledore and a little worry came to him. "Sir, can we find the Aurors now? We have to get Ginny back."

"Yes." Dumbledore said, also looking worried. McGonagall began ushering them away.

"What are you talking about?" Leon demanded, his eyes wide. He jumped when he felt the brush of... something against his shoulder. He turned his head but nothing was there. When he looked back, the group was walking away. "Hey! Dumbledore, what the bloody hell is going on?" He demanded, running after them.

James slowly exhaled when the man had gone and huddled closer to his wife and Sirius under the Invisibility Cloak as they hurried down the hall. Sirius very quietly apologized for touching Leon and Lily whispered back that it was alright. Together they shuffled and scurried to the doors of the Department of Mysteries. As they neared the door, they waited to make sure no one would be coming in or out (especially Leon) and then quickly withdrew the Invisibility Cloak. James stuffed it into his pocket and opened the door, waiting for his two companions to go inside before closing the door.

"Okay, we don't have more than a few hours. Harry's counting on us to find this prophecy of his before we can go back."

“But didn’t he and Hermione just say in the hallway that the prophecy shattered? And who’s to say it even existed here? Chances are more likely that it would belong to Neville.” Sirius said as he looked at the circle of possible doors.

“It may be the key to everything.” Lily said, peering at the doors. “It wasn’t destroyed, I don’t think. I have a hunch anyway.”

“That’s the one.” James said, pointing to a door to their far left and a little behind Sirius. “I remember when Leon gave me the tour while I was still training to become an Auror. See? I told you I’d remember.” James went and opened the door, frowning as he looked inside.

Sirius arched an eyebrow and mumbled to Lily. “How in the name of Merlin would he know the difference between the doors? They all look the same to me.”

“Don’t think too much about it.” Lily said, a hint of amusement in her voice as James closed the door and waited for the room to stop spinning. “Whatever method he was using, it obviously isn’t working.”

“I’ll get it.” James said irritably.

“Whatever you do just hurry, this place gives me the creeps.” Sirius said. He felt a shiver go up his spine inexplicably. He had been to plenty of haunted and frightening places before but being here, in this place, made him feel as if cold water had been poured down his spine. This was somehow even worse than Azkaban with the dementors. He shuddered and waited impatiently for James to pick another door.

“Aha! I found it!”

“It was dumb luck.” Lily said as she went into the room. James glared at her back as Sirius followed after her and James, making sure to close the door.

They were inside of an enormous, dark room. Sirius jerked when they started floating into the air. He quickly grabbed hold of James’s hand

and James also grabbed onto Lily (though he had to get her ankle since she started floating before either of them). A star floated by them as they went.

“Huh, you don’t see that every day.” Lily said as they went past it. Sirius snorted and held on to James, watching as they passed a cluster of stars gathered together not too far from the lone star.

As they went, James said “We’ll get there soon. We could have gone directly to the Time Room but if what Leon said was true, there are probably Unspeakables there trying to salvage the wreckage that’s going on there. This way we can sneak in directly to the Hall of Prophecy before anyone can see us.”

“What exactly did you do to get to view the Department of Mysteries? It’s not exactly a common tourist attraction, even for Aurors.” Sirius said, highly curious. When Harry first suggested sneaking into the Department of Mysteries to check out a hunch Hermione had about the prophecies, James had been the first to suggest the three of them. When he’d been vague about knowing his way around the Department, Harry hadn’t left much time to question him about it. Sirius was curious though, especially because James had never mentioned it to him.

“Well, do you remember my bachelor’s party?” James said.

“Er, not all of it.” Sirius said with a grin.

“Do I even want to hear this conversation?” Lily demanded from a little above them. She twisted her body to watch a comet flash by her, speeding off into the darkness.

“I won’t go into detail,” James hastily said, “but Leon showed up at one point. He got pretty drunk and said some interesting stuff about the inside, namely some of the lesser known rooms. Even the Hall of Prophecy was pretty famous outside of the Department and there were rumors of other rooms. I’ve always been interested in it.”

“I remember you talking about interning there after Hogwarts,” Sirius said thoughtfully, “but then when your dad was murdered...” He left the rest of the thought unspoken.

“Exactly,” James said, “I became an Auror. Getting back to my story, while he was drunk, Leon started making outrageous bets with some of the more sober party-goers, namely the stripper-,”

“Stripper?” Lily said in an interested voice.

“Sirius’s idea,” James said, which was a blatant lie, “anyway, so he was telling her his life’s story and how much money he made. She got interested and started talking about marriage.”

“She wasn’t particularly right in the head.” Sirius added since Lily was still glaring at James. “She was harmless, promise.”

“Anyway,” James said a bit impatiently, “He almost asked her to marry him. I intervened and sent her off in Remus’s direction, which he probably never forgave me for, and he said he would owe me a favor for saving his life. That favor was getting a tour of this place.”

“Is that really true?” Sirius demanded. It sounded too whacky.

“Of course that’s not the story.” James said, smirking. “I just made it up to see how pissed off at me Lily could get.”

Lily kicked James’s knuckles as they coasted by an especially large planet with seven small moons. Sirius snorted into his hand. He knew the real story behind it was probably less complicated, probably James’s father took him before he’d died. James was always like that though, making up outrageous stories to hide the pain of memories better left forgotten.

“I think we’re here.” Lily said as she took hold of a doorknob. She pushed open the door and touched down on the floor. They stepped into the Hall of Prophecy and started walking down the rows, looking for the one Harry had mentioned.

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Lily drew her cloak tighter around her shoulders, squinting a little as they made their way down the rows of shelves. It was extremely creepy since even the shuffling of their feet on the ground was faded and distant, making the silence and isolation all the more depressing. She really would have preferred that James keep his huge mouth shut and let someone else come and look for the stupid prophecy instead of the three of them. Then, as was Lily's way, the practical voice in her mind reminded her that they were honestly the best people for the job. No one was supposed to know where they were and it was practically suicide for them to come to the Ministry of Magic anyway. They had a reputation for being incredibly elusive and people expected them to be around or at least near Hogwarts anyway (because Harry was supposed to be there) and so no one would suspect to look for them here.

Still, that didn't change the fact that this place creeped her out. She leaned closer to James, even wrapping her arm around his waist to get closer to him. He was exuding a confident, care-free air that made her feel better, even though she knew he was probably as terrified as she was. Sirius too wasn't looking too good. In fact, Lily noted, he was looking even worse than usual. He kept looking around with a strange look on his face, almost as if he was constantly surprised by his surroundings.

"Are you okay?" Lily whispered, immediately wincing at the tremble in her own voice. Sirius looked at her and smiled weakly.

"I don't know. I feel... really weird." He admitted.

"What's that?" James asked, looking at his best friend. "Hey Padfoot, you don't look so good. You okay?"

"I just don't like this place." He admitted, shuddering. He didn't even try to put up a false bravado that Lily always knew him for. When he was scared, the first thing Sirius would do was pretend that he was anything but. He'd make jokes, he'd be as obnoxious as possible, he'd tease and nag and laugh loudly. He hadn't done any of those

things since they entered the Department of Mysteries. He's terrified, Lily realized with shock. More than he's ever been since I've seen him.

"We'll get out of here soon," James assured him as he leaned closer, brushing off the metal name plates, covered in dust. A faint sound, very far away, began from somewhere off in the distance. "What is that?"

"I dunno," Lily said, peering into the darkness. She fingered her wand as she looked around, but the sound seemed to have faded in the distance. "Let's hurry, I don't want to be caught here. There aren't enough hiding places and someone's bound to bump into us with the cloak."

Sirius hurried a little and tripped seemingly over his own shoes. He grunted and grabbed the nearest shelf, supporting himself as best he could. Lily and James rushed to grab him before he knocked over the shelf and caused a chain reaction of noise that would bring every single Ministry official running their way. Sirius held his breath as the others did, waiting to see if anyone had heard them.

When nothing came, they all breathed a collective sigh of relief. It was difficult to relax in this situation. The tension between their shoulder blades made them all curve their spines inward, waiting for an impending blow. The fact that it didn't come only made them more nervous.

"What's that?" Lily whispered. They looked down at the globe clutched in Sirius's hand. He blinked, not remembering reaching out for it. The nameplate where the globe had been said, in dusty cursive, "Harry James Potter."

"That's... convenient," Sirius said uncomfortably. The chilled feeling from earlier had crept back into him. He felt as if he wasn't alone in his own skin, like some other force was pushing his body to do things against his will and, even worse, without him even realizing. He held the prophecy in his hand, weighing the small object, gently brushing the dust off its surface. He felt how powerful it was, this little object,

and realized why Harry had told them to get it. It was important. Just holding it told him so.

Prophecies had always been something that Sirius neither cared for nor bothered to think about. He was not of the opinion that fate had anything to do with anyone's life. People are born, they live their lives, and then they die. He didn't think that very much happened in between that drove people's lives in a certain direction or connected their fates, as he'd heard many people (mostly women) tell him over the years. Plenty of phony fortune-tellers had gotten famous (and rich) over the years coming up with all kinds of nonsense. It was nonsense that was so carefully phrased, Sirius knew, that it could be interpreted to mean anything and the old ninnies ended up being right through sheer ambiguity. This kind of thing had always bothered Sirius – he liked his future clear-cut and straight-forward.

Something like a prophecy would only get in the way of the way things were supposed to be. Sirius knew that it was a prophecy that had caused all of this trouble in the first place. If Voldemort hadn't decided that there was a threat, some child danger that would come back to haunt him when that child grew up, he wouldn't have bothered to start killing people, more specifically people so close to Sirius.

“Ready to go?” James said by him. Sirius jumped, startled out of his musings. It wasn't like him to reflect so philosophically on life. He'd done plenty of that in Azkaban and he shouldn't have been doing it now, not when they were all in such danger of being caught and in such an open area. He should have been alert. He shouldn't have been thinking such melancholy thoughts about things that could have or should have been.

“Yes, I'm ready,” Sirius said firmly. He handed the prophecy to James, who slipped it carefully into his robes pocket. The pocket had a sealing spell around it and some protective padding (some socks from Harry's trunk) to keep it from breaking in case there was a scuffle later on. Sirius walked back the way they had come, thankful that he and the others were finally leaving. There was nothing

particularly evil about the Hall of Prophecies, just something profoundly creepy about walking in such a silent place.

As they walked, the same distant crashing sound came again. Someone far away yelled something and the group froze, suddenly jerked back into motion when they heard what the person said.

“LOOK OUT!! THE SHELVES ARE FALLING AGAIN!!”

They didn't know who'd said it. They didn't know who the voice had said it to. They didn't even know if they'd been spotted. All they knew was that the shelves had indeed started to crash, and they were crashing towards them.

They ran, ducking under various obstacles and hurtling full speed towards the door. They careened over objects they'd never noticed before on their leisurely stroll through the Hall of Prophecy before and both Sirius and James grabbed Lily before she could fall, never slowing their pace as they rushed through the door. They panted when they'd slammed the door behind them, breathing shallowly as they heard the crescendo of sound explode behind them. The door sagged only a little and then returned to normal. Silence descended over everything and the three fugitives heaved a sigh of relief.

Their relief was short lived. Sirius suddenly stiffened beside his friend and made a soft hissing sound. Lily looked over at him, a hand clutching her chest to keep her heart from breaking out of her ribcage. “Sirius? Are you okay?”

James frowned, probably noticing the change in his friend even more than Lily did. He reached out and swung an arm around Sirius's shoulder, pulling him closer. “Don't worry,” James said firmly, “we're not going to let anything happen to you.”

Sirius carefully hugged James back but didn't let go, his face steadily becoming paler. “It's not the Hall of Prophecy...” he said in a whisper. He shook himself and stood, trying to get his composure back. “I don't know what it is about this place... maybe there's some kind of charm or something that makes me feel really weird, like I might...

float away or something. I felt it less in the Hall of Prophecy but now that we're here..." he looked around.

That's when they looked around the new room. Sirius froze, his eyes widening so much that the whites stood out sharply around his eyes. He barely breathed as he pointed down the steps to the only object in the room – a dais with a strange arch, covered by a black cloth-like material.

"What's that?" Lily asked curiously.

"Don't go near it," Sirius said in a whisper. James and Lily looked at him, really looked at him, and pressed their hands to his arms to steady him. The human contact must have done him some good because he finally started breathing again, his eyes now avoiding the strange veil as they crossed the distance to the next door. They didn't go down the stairs, although that would have made their progress a great deal faster, because Sirius was absolutely terrified of it. James didn't know what to say to his best friend. He'd never known Sirius to be so petrified of anything, never to this degree.

"Please tell him not to feel guilty," a soft whisper reached their ears. Sirius screamed and threw himself against the wall, hiding his face as he trembled. Lily and James whirled around, trying to find the voice. They froze when they saw where it was coming from.

There were three figures standing beside the veil, their features unmistakable. They looked exactly as if they were alive, but the haunted, tired look in their eyes, even from far away, signaled their true state. These were dead people. These were no longer living beings. And they looked exactly like the three of them – Lily, James, and Sirius. The Lily and James ghosts looked far younger and healthier than their living counterparts but the eyes were drawn and lifeless. And so full of sadness.

"Please tell Harry for us... not to feel guilty," the whisper came again. The ghosts hadn't moved at all, not even to open their mouths, but it was Sirius's tired voice. Lily felt goose bumps so strong, they hurt her

arms as she stared at the figures. Never, in her entire life, had she felt as terrified as she did at that moment.

“Why would Harry feel guilty?” James whispered, clutching at Lily more for comfort than protection. He felt as if someone was walking on his grave, speaking to parts of himself that he’d never known existed. This was worse than Azkaban, so much worse he couldn’t even fathom the terror of it.

“He has seen much death,” Lily’s whisper came, so soft that they barely heard it. Lily felt a shiver go through her, hearing that voice, so sad, so far away. “He feels guilty for Sirius.”

“He shouldn’t,” Sirius’s whisper came next. His eyes were large and haunted, although the ghost smiled faintly. “He is a good boy... a good man. Like his father. Please take care of him for us. We can’t reach him here.”

“Voldemort has a great deal of power now,” Lily’s whisper said as the ghost lifted her chin carefully. She seemed stronger now, her eyes blazing with a power that filled the room. Sirius gasped and clung to James, his eyes wide with fear. “We shall continue to fight where we are, to protect him as much as possible. We need you. We need someone who can protect him.”

“I will,” Lily whispered to her ghost, feeling herself shaking. She didn’t even feel embarrassed that she was so scared. The ghosts didn’t seem to care at all, they simply smiled.

“We will,” Sirius and James said with strained voices.

“Good,” the three ghosts whispered, smiling that strange lifeless, beautiful, sad smile. They nodded their heads in a gentle bow and walked into the veil. They did not appear out from the other side.

“Oh my god,” Sirius whispered. “That was the absolute creepiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“We need to leave,” James said, his voice just as shaken. He shoved both of his companions quickly towards the door and practically kicked it down to get through. They slide to the floor against the shut door, panting. There didn’t seem to be enough air in the room anymore. The walls felt close, like a coffin. They shuddered at the image they all felt pressing on them and leaned towards each other for comfort and warmth.

hapter 40: The Truth

Harry did not feel like having this conversation. He thought that perhaps liberating himself of this awful secret would have been a relief but it only made him feel tired and agitated at the same time. It had been, he reflected, his own bright idea to finally tell someone of authority that he was not, in fact, the Harry Potter that everyone had always known. It was difficult to admit that he was, in fact, from an entirely different universe in which a great deal of information was sometimes completely opposite of how it seemed to be in this universe. Even worse, he just could not wrap his mind around the fact that all of his friends, Kingsley and Tonks and Mad-Eye Moody were staring at him with suspicion rather than respect.

“So let me get this straight,” Tonks said, a slight disgust sprinkling her words, “you are not the real Harry Potter.”

“Right,” Harry said, repressing a tired sigh. “I’m from another universe.”

“Another universe,” Moody said in a monotone.

“Yes,” Harry said, glancing at him.

“And in this other universe, you’re the Boy Who Lived. And now, You-Know-Who is after you,” Tonks said, her tone still disbelieving.

“Yes,” Harry said. It occurred to him that sending Dumbledore out of the room had been a huge mistake. He shouldn’t have been stupid enough to ask for a private audience with these people. They would have believed him without a second thought in his own universe and up until this point, everyone seemed to believe him when he told them where he was really from. These Aurors and secret Order of the Phoenix members did not trust so easily. Perhaps it had something to do with seeing his transformation from puny coward to kick-ass wizard, Harry reflected.

“Are you sure you haven’t hit your head?” Tonks asked with an arched eyebrow.

“I’m telling you the truth. Voldemort is out there right now, killing people in this universe, and sending me calling cards. He said that he has the Minister of Magic AND Ginny Weasley right now, and he wants to call me out on a challenge. I can’t let him kill more people just to get my attention.”

“You’re barkin’ mad,” Moody said snidely.

“Don’t be that way, Mad-Eye,” Tonks said. “It could just as easily be stress over the Potters and Sirius escaping from Azkaban.”

“This isn’t about my mum and dad and Sirius!” Harry said, raising his voice angrily. “This has to do with the safety of the wizarding world right now. You have no idea what the Voldemort I know is capable of! He’ll do anything to kill me and right now, he has a lot of people standing in his way. And it’ll be twice as hard to get to him now than before because he can pretend to be the Voldemort that you know!”

“Time out,” Kingsley said in a tired voice. “You’re confusing me with all of these different... people.”

“Dumbledore believes me,” Harry said half-desperately. He didn’t want to bring this up but he was getting to the end of his rope. He knew that every second he wasted with these idiots was just more time that could get his parents caught in the Department of Mysteries. He knew he needed to buy them time but conversely, he didn’t want to stay here much longer. He needed to get out of there and start looking for Voldemort. He would much rather do that with back up from Order members and not alone but if they were unwilling to help him, he’d go for it.

The biggest problem was that he couldn’t bring up the Order of the Phoenix part. He knew very well that they were all members but Dumbledore had taken him aside earlier and warned him that the Ministry of Magic was probably the most dangerous place to mention their involvement with the seemingly mythical Order. There were dozens of top spies from Voldemort all over the place and he could

not risk the Order members, not even for something like this. Harry realized now what a mistake it had been to ask Dumbledore to leave the room and he wished he could ask him back into the room, but he felt that it would be a little like giving up if he couldn't convince them.

"I'm trying to help you guys," Harry said. "My friends outside, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, they're from my universe too. If you'll just come to Hogwarts with us, I'll show you that there is another Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger there too. And they'll admit it too, that they used a very powerful restricted spell to summon me here. They're worried about being sent to Azkaban, that's why they never said anything. But it's true and I would have kept it quiet too but Voldemort is a bigger threat than you can understand right now. You need to believe me."

"I think I've had enough," Moody said, standing with a loud huff. "Take your rubbish elsewhere."

"Sorry," Tonks said when she saw Harry's pleading look. "We just can't... believe what you're telling us. It's too much. Dumbledore's getting senile if he believes anything you just told us." She stood and started ushering him out of the room. Harry resisted more out of frustration than anything else, grunting when she opened the door.

"Tonks!" Ron and Hermione said with some relief when she opened the door. She balked at their enthusiastic greeting.

"Er..." said Tonks, looking lost.

"It's so good to meet you in this universe," Hermione said warmly, her smile growing with relief. "You don't know this of course, but you're one of the main reasons that we got here at all. You knew where to find the restricted book to get us here to find Harry. You remembered it from your aunt's library, remember? Mrs. Black had a restricted book of spells from her old Charms class in Durmstrang and you remembered seeing it."

Harry stared at Hermione and wanted very much to kiss her. Of course Hermione guessed from the look on his face that he hadn't

convinced anyone of anything. She'd been especially detailed, smiled in the most clueless way, because of course she knew that they couldn't possibly believe Harry without proof. And it seemed to have worked, judging by how pale Tonks had become.

"How do you... how do you know that?" Tonks whispered softly.

"The same way we know that you and the others in that room are part of a very secret club that we can't mention," Ron said softly. "The Dumbledore of our world said that you'd all be aware of the emergency password all members of this club would know."

Tonks remained rigid behind Harry, her hand still on his back, her eyes wide with surprise and a little bit of curiosity too. Ron moved forward and ducked his head, whispering so softly into her ear that Harry couldn't hear anything even being this close to them both. Tonks gasped softly and grabbed Harry's robe from behind, dragging him inside again. Ron and Hermione came in quickly, keeping their heads together as they came in.

"You guys are brilliant," Harry said with a big grin on his face.

"How have you been surviving without us?" Hermione asked, rolling her eyes. Ron chuckled and winked at Harry, waiting for Tonks to finish whispering to the others in the room. Moody seemed angry at first that Harry had returned to the room but after some furious whispering from Tonks, they'd started a heated discussion a little away from them.

"I should have asked Dumbledore to stay," Harry said regretfully. "Where is he, by the way?"

"He had to go somewhere," Hermione said, a note of curiosity in her voice. "He seemed pretty dodgy about it but we couldn't convince him to stay. It was very unlike Dumbledore."

"Is there something we should be worried about?" Harry asked, sensing Hermione's worry. "I mean, this wouldn't be the first time he's

kept something important from us. Do you have any idea what it could be?"

"Might be your folks," Ron said softly. Harry blanched at the thought of something happening to his parents. He couldn't stand the thought... was there something happening that he should be aware of? Should he go find his parents right now and see if they were alright? No, Harry thought firmly, they have a mission just like you do. Focus on what needs to be done from your end and worry about them later. If they're fine then you're just wasting an opportunity right now worrying about them.

"They'll be fine," Ron said reassuringly.

"We'll make sure of it," Hermione added, her face resolute.

Tonks and the others came closer, their faces suspicious but curious. Harry straightened a little, lifting his chin. It was difficult to face their scrutiny but if this was the least of his problems, he could handle a little paranoia on their part. He knew that half the reason they were still alive was because of that carefully honed sense of survival. He couldn't fault them for protecting themselves. How would he react, he thought, if some random person were to approach him and say that he was from another universe and that he needed their help?

"If what you say is true," Moody began carefully, his eyes narrowed, "then what can we do? Do you know where the Minister could be kept?"

"I have some ideas," Harry admitted, "but I don't know for sure. I don't know what kind of information you already have or what safe houses you've already raided for Death Eaters. I do have some idea of where they might be held though."

"Then let's discuss them," Moody said with a new resolve to his stance.

Before Harry could open his mouth, the door slammed open and several Aurors rushed into the room, closely followed by Dumbledore.

The Headmaster had a strained expression on his face, his eyes going to Moody and bypassing Harry, Hermione, and Ron.

“These are the ones. Arrest them,” Dumbledore said. Harry stared at the Headmaster with his jaw hanging open. His friends were in similar states, too shocked to do anything. Even Moody and Tonks were just gawking at him as the two Aurors rushed forward and grabbed at them.

“What are you doing?” Harry shouted, pulling out his wand only to have it ripped away from him before he could utter a single spell. Ron managed to get half a spell out before someone hit him from behind and he crashed to his knees. Hermione screamed and struggled as they grabbed her. This put Harry into fight mode and he lashed out at the nearest Aurors, kicking and punching at anything he could. Tonks rushed to help but Dumbledore held out his hand to stop her.

Ron struggled on the floor as two Aurors held him down firmly, using binding charms to tie his hands behind his back and around his ankles so he couldn’t stand. Hermione bit and scratched the Aurors trying to hold her down but the Aurors were clever. They tied Hermione and Harry together to stop them from fighting. They struggled not to hurt each other but by then, they’d already been restrained. Harry’s eyes sought Dumbledore’s, breathing hard from anger and frustration.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?” Harry demanded angrily.

“This boy is an imposter,” Dumbledore said calmly, ignoring his question. Tonks and Kingsley exchanged surprised looks as Dumbledore walked around the squirming Ron, his eyes seeking those of Mad-Eye Moody. “I’m sorry I didn’t say so before, Alastor, but I had to convince the boy that he was safe. He would have harmed others if I’d tried to restrain him before. There were far too many around him before.”

“What are you doing?” Harry demanded, a panicked note entering his voice. This was not the Dumbledore he knew. He knew that but at the same time, the thought hit him with just as much ferocity. This

was not the Dumbledore he knew. The Dumbledore he knew would never leave the capture of an imposter to Aurors after he'd left said imposter in front of unsuspecting Aurors for over half an hour. Harry just stared at his profile, trying to push down his fury enough to think. What had he done? Hadn't he been convincing? What was happening?

"This boy has been in contact with the Azkaban convicts," Dumbledore said calmly. "I allowed for their plans to unfold so that they could be caught all at once. James and Lily Potter, along with Sirius Black, are in the Department of Mysteries."

"NO!" Harry screamed, fighting with renewed vigor. He felt so angry, he thought he would choke on it. Every piece of glass inside the room exploded all at once. Ron yelled angrily and struggled to get off the floor. Two more Aurors had to jump on his back to keep him from squirming to his feet. Hermione struggled just as desperately against Harry, her eyes wide with fear and shock.

"They have been in contact with them for some time," Dumbledore continued, his eyes boring into Mad-Eye's. Mad-Eye's normal eye was fixed on Dumbledore but his magical eye was focused on Harry. Harry struggled desperately, staring back at him pleadingly.

"Don't let them get my parents, they're innocent," Harry said. He knew that his plea would only make him look guiltier but he didn't care. Fear for his parents had flared up so strongly in his heart, he could barely control himself. "Please Moody, don't let them! I don't know what the hell is wrong with Dumbledore but don't listen to him! He's only trying to trick you! Please Moody!"

"Tonks," Hermione said pleadingly, "Tonks please, I only just saw you! You told me yourself that you would believe me no matter what universe I was in! You said you'd always know a truthful soul when you saw one and I'm telling you now, truthfully, that we're not imposters at all. We're only trying to help! Please believe us!"

"I have information from some of my spies," Dumbledore continued calmly, as if no one had interrupted him. Harry's eyes widened as

Dumbledore came closer to them. "It is my belief that Harry Potter as you see him now, is actually a Death Eater in disguise. I have spoken with many of the faculty in my school and, from what they have told me, his behavior is very much changed, in many ways. We believe that this person killed the real Harry Potter and replaced him in order to spy for Voldemort."

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" Harry exploded, struggling desperately, no longer caring about hurting Hermione. Hermione for her part was struggling just as hard, her eyes widening.

"Harry would NEVER be a Death Eater!" Ron shouted from under the mountain of Aurors over him. "Harry's the good guy! You're all bonkers if you think he'd be a Death Eater!"

"Then how do you explain this?" Dumbledore said softly as he grabbed Harry's left arm and rolled up the sleeve. Harry's eyes widened when he saw what Dumbledore was doing. Right there, clear as day, was the Dark Mark. Ron's sharp intake of air was the only sound in the room. Hermione started breathing hard, twisting her head this way and that trying to see what everyone was staring at.

"It isn't true," Ron said at last, his voice shaky. "Harry isn't a Death Eater. He would never... it's a mistake. It isn't real..."

"I didn't do that," Harry said angrily, "it was Voldemort! He possessed me! Ron, don't you dare think what you're thinking! It isn't true!"

"I don't believe it," Ron said in response to Harry. "I'll never believe it. I know it isn't true. It's a trick! Dumbledore's the imposter!"

"That's enough," said one of the Aurors holding Ron down. "I've seen all I need to see." He and the other three Aurors holding Ron lifted him to his feet and gagged him with a spell. Ron tried to bash his head into the nearest Auror but they held him back, restraining him more tightly with several more spells. Hermione screamed and was immediately gagged with a silencing spell as they separated her and Harry into two tightly bound bundles.

“Where are you taking them?” Tonks said in a soft, horrified voice. Harry looked at her pleadingly and, for a moment, he saw the worry in her eyes. She believed him, he realized, and he tried to plead with her but he’d been gagged as well. He was helpless now. Even Tonks couldn’t help him now.

“They’ll go to Azkaban for now,” Dumbledore said calmly. “And await trial until the Minister can be found. Until then, they are suspected terrorists. I suggest you forget whatever they told you.”

With one desperate last look at Tonks, Harry was lifted off the ground and carried out of the room.

Chapter 40: Voldemort's Foiled Plans

Albus Dumbledore had faith in his students. Sending Hermione and Ron to the alternate universe seemed like the best plan of action at the time, especially when Harry revealed how very different the two places were. He'd slaved over the idea, in fact, but was forced into action when Voldemort preemptively found a way into the other world through Draco Malfoy. Thinking back on it now, Dumbledore thought that he should have done things differently. Harry had not mentioned anything about speaking to his, Dumbledore's, counterpart in that other world. A small part of Dumbledore felt a little hurt that Harry no longer trusted him.

"Albus?" a soft voice said. Dumbledore looked up at Remus Lupin and smiled faintly. He'd been lost in his thoughts, planning the next scheduled communication period. Ron and Hermione had already contacted him several days ago when they'd arrived safely in the new universe and had dutifully cut off communication while they searched for Harry. The plan was to call Dumbledore only if they were in trouble and instead to call him two weeks after they'd left. In this way, he could ensure that the two students had not been killed on their journey but would also allow them the freedom to search for Harry without having to worry about their home universe.

That two week marker was coming up soon and Dumbledore had been planning and organizing, making sure that he was prepared for whenever they would communicate with him again. In the process of thinking of his plans, he'd unwittingly fallen into a bit of a slump, thinking of all the things he could have done better. As useless as he knew clinging to the past was, he couldn't help remembering the hurt and betrayed expression on Harry's face the last time he'd been in Dumbledore's office. It was a look he would never forget, no matter how much time passed or whether Harry would ever forgive him or not.

"You seem to be very distant, Headmaster," Remus said as he took a seat across from Dumbledore. As he looked around the office quietly, Dumbledore studied him. The last survivor of his friends, Remus didn't look too good. He'd lost a great deal of weight, allowed

his clothing to become shaggier and riddled with holes, but he'd kept up his appearance to the best of his ability. He was clean-shaven and well-groomed, if not a little rough around the edges. Dumbledore wondered what it would have been like for Remus, if only he had not been beaten by a werewolf. The possibility that such a universe might actually exist somewhere out there where that possibility was a reality only made Dumbledore marvel.

"I was thinking about Harry," Dumbledore admitted, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his desk.

"I don't know who isn't thinking about Harry right now," Remus said. "I hate the idea that he's out there somewhere in more danger than usual."

"That has always been the way of things," Dumbledore said, hiding an amused smile. "He has a tendency to run into trouble no matter where he goes."

"It's a bit infuriating," Remus said. "I'm glad Ron and Hermione are with him now. I can't imagine what he has been through without them. He said something about the Ron and Hermione he'd met in this other universe... something about them being responsible for his disappearance in the first place. I didn't trust them... so I'm glad his real friends are there now."

"I am relieved as well," Dumbledore said. "We do not and cannot know just how different these two worlds are. Harry mentioned that his parents are still alive in that world and that they were imprisoned in Azkaban for crimes we do not know of. It is possible that they might even be guilty of the crimes against them."

"That's impossible," Remus said in a quiet, dangerous voice. His eyes had narrowed and his fists were balled up so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"I mean no offense," Dumbledore said soothingly. "I only mean that we don't know what Harry has gotten himself into. This world may be so different, even I may be evil."

“Now you’re really talking impossibilities,” Remus said with a small grin. “What would we do if you were evil? How could we possibly fight Voldemort if you were on his side?”

“My dear Remus,” Dumbledore said with a mischievous grin, “if I were to be on the dark side, I assure you that it would be Lord Voldemort who would be on my side.”

Harry stared glumly at the wall of his cell. They’d taken his wand away and chained him to one of three chairs in the room. Hermione sat to his right and Ron to his left, both equally chained down. Three Aurors had been rather badly cursed by Hermione before they’d managed to get her wand away from her and Ron had extra chains on him because he’d kicked a particularly nasty Auror in the nose hard enough to not only break it but simultaneously render him unconscious. As proud of his friends as he was, Harry felt more depressed than angry.

They were imprisoned in the private dungeons of the Ministry of Magic. It was a temporary jail for criminals that were first interrogated by the Ministry officials and then shipped off to Azkaban. As curious as Harry had always been about Azkaban, ever since he’d first heard of it, he had absolutely zero interest in going there himself. He had enough problems as it was – jail just seemed like the last straw.

“When we get out of here,” Ron said, breaking the silence, “I am going to kick Malfoy’s arse first.”

“That’s the first thing you’re going to do?” Hermione said in a half-interested voice. “Why?”

“I have a theory,” Ron said.

“Here we go,” Harry said, a faint smile tickling the corner of his mouth.

“Hear me out! You can’t shoot me down before I’ve even bloody said anything!”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, “please continue.”

“Alright,” Ron said. “I have a theory. This is all secretly Malfoy’s part. See, he’s always secretly wanted to be Harry. So he started messing around, looking for some other universe where he could, you know, be Harry. But he screwed up... and just blamed it all on us when it went to hell.”

“Interesting theory,” Harry said.

“I agree,” Hermione said, smirking. “Okay, let’s agree. When this is all over, we blame Malfoy for it.”

“Seconded,” Harry said with a smirk.

“You see? I can have great ideas too,” Ron said.

The three friends stiffened when they heard the heavy scraping of metal as the door opened farther down the hallway. They waited, their heads raised towards the door as they watched a dark form approach them. The cold hiss of dementors approached them behind the dark form but the three did not so much as flinch. Their eyes narrowed but they did not show their fear. Azkaban, they decided, was going to be a temporary setback. They were going to escape and they would do so quickly.

“I’m not sure I heard you correctly,” Voldemort said softly. “Please repeat yourself.”

“Um...” Avery wasn’t sure what to do. On the one hand, his Lord and Master had made a very rational and simple request for a repetition of a report that Avery himself had delivered. He remembered the information, he could recite it with ease, and he knew he should repeat it as he had been requested. On the other hand, the Dark Lord had the kind of look on his face that suggested that repeating the message would only anger if not infuriate him to the point of murder. This would not be a problem normally but,

unfortunately, this “point of murder” seemed directed at him. So... to repeat or not to repeat...

“Avery.” Oh, the voice. Ahem, okay, repeat.

“It appears that... um... Harry Potter has been arrested with two other children, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. They are being transported to Azkaban on charges of being a Death Eater. Some Aurors saw that he had a Dark Mark on his arm” Avery did not pause this time as he had before, knowing that his lord would not explain how it was that Harry Potter even had a Dark Mark to begin with, “and his friends were arrested because they resisted arrest.”

“Why did the Aurors even check him?” Voldemort demanded angrily, his fingers clenching and unclenching over the armrests of his chair.

“From what I was told, Dumbledore came to the Ministry to speak with the Aurors about the Minister being captured...” Avery glanced at the cowering figure chained to the floor by the window, the snake Nagini wrapped snugly around the terrified Minister’s legs, then returned his gaze to the Dark Lord. “According to him, he sensed that there was something wrong and investigated using Legilimency. He said that he sensed something from Potter.”

“He... sensed something,” Voldemort said in a disbelieving tone of voice.

“Yes,” Avery said, swallowing carefully. “He said that he discovered that Potter was helping his parents and Black to evade the Ministry and that he’d entered the Ministry in the hopes of creating a terrorist situation. According to Dumbledore... Potter was under your orders to kill everyone in the building.”

Voldemort sat back in his chair, closing his eyes. To process such information required his entire control because it was just... so stupid. That was the problem – it was something so unexpected and so ludicrous. Voldemort knew that this other universe was different (boy, but did he know this universe was different) but Dumbledore had never been this unpredictable.

Or rather... he was being very predictable. Voldemort had issued a challenge, something that he knew Harry had to have mentioned to Dumbledore in the first place... this seemed like the logical thing to do in order to keep the balance of power just off balance enough that Harry remained outside of his influence.

Voldemort froze, his eyes slowly widening. Was that it? Could it possibly be that simple? He'd dreaded coming to this new universe because of only one person – Albus Dumbledore. The old man was a lunatic, but a brilliant lunatic. He always managed to stay just ahead of seemingly everyone, scheming to a level that made even Voldemort slightly envious. Crazy, brilliant Albus Dumbledore... could it be that he too was watered down and weak in this universe? Did this same weakness extend to his brilliant mind as well? Was he perhaps incapable of battling him, Voldemort, in not only the magical arena but also the mental one?

It was such a complete slap in the face, Voldemort had no idea how to think about it. Dumbledore had been a constant in his life, a larger-than-life presence that peered over his shoulder and hindered him from doing exactly what he wanted. If Dumbledore wasn't there to stop him... if Dumbledore wasn't there to stop him... the thought continued to repeat in his mind without a discernable answer in sight.

"My Lord?" Avery hated to interrupt his master when he had that thoughtful, mercifully distracted expression on his face but he was getting thoroughly freaked out by the soft keening sound the Minister was making. Nagini had curled around his torso and seemed to delight in constricting around the helpless little man, perhaps only to play with him. She had specific orders not to eat him, not even a "nibble" Voldemort had said with a gentle smile. The Minister had not felt reassured and had spent hours screaming all sorts of rewards for anyone who helped him escape.

"What is it?" Voldemort asked distractedly.

"I only wish to know what you would like for me to do about the Potter issue. We have many contacts in Azkaban but we need to start

planning now if you wish to get him before he reaches the island,” Avery said.

“Send a force of Death Eaters to attack whatever mode of transportation he takes to get to Azkaban. I want you to bring him and his parents back to me alive,” Voldemort said as he stood, gliding towards the door.

“Sir, what about his friends? The blood-traitor and the Mudblood?” Avery asked, just to be sure of his orders. This was far more comfortable, Avery reflected. He understood orders and following them was comforting after the chaos of a new Dark Lord – specifically a more demanding Dark Lord.

“Make sure to kill them in the most painful and gruesome way possible, preferably in his presence,” Voldemort said. “If you can, do it quickly. The three together are a force you cannot defeat on your own.”

Avery snorted. “They are only children,” he said arrogantly.

“You have no idea what those children are capable of. Kill them the moment you see them, they will be the most difficult opponents you will ever experience. They are more dangerous than any Auror.”

Avery thought he was joking at first. When Voldemort left the room without looking back, he realized that the Dark Lord was not the joking type. Avery, occupied with the mental energy it took to rearrange his view of the world, did not notice the pair of tennis ball-sized eyes that were trained on his back. When he left the room, he had no idea that Dobby, Lucius Malfoy’s worst house elf, had heard every word and was already racing towards the Pettigrew house, and to Blinky.

Chapter 42: An Unexpected Problem

Harry leaned his head back against the car seat, his eyes drifting up to the fuzzy underside of the roof. Hermione rested her head against Ron's shoulder, her eyes half-lidded but attentive, watching everything. Ron yawned widely, showing all of his teeth as he glanced at the Aurors sitting on either side of Harry. The one to Harry's right was a large, bulky man who looked like he could be a Beater on any professional Quidditch team. In his surprisingly delicate-looking hand he held his wand, casually directed at Ron. With his other hand he cradled an ice pack to his cheek where Ron had punched him not an hour ago. Every time he winced, Ron grinned.

On Harry's left side was a short, stocky Auror with blonde hair and beady gray eyes. He had his wand trained on Harry's elbow, his eyes focused over Hermione's head to the windshield. For several minutes he'd been quietly muttering to the driver that someone was following them but, otherwise, he hadn't said a word. After ten minutes, the Auror confirmed that no one was following them and that he had, in fact, been imagining things. Of the two Aurors, Harry knew that the stocky blonde was the more dangerous of the two. Despite his paranoid belief that people were out to get him (there probably were a few of these out in the world), he had not so much as flinched when Ron slapped his partner around. His reaction had been to merely grab Hermione by the hair and threaten to curse her brains out unless Ron cooperated.

Harry had to admit that this method of intimidation was a highly successful one. Then again, Hermione HAD managed to break the blonde's toe before she'd been wrestled into the car. A quick healing charm fixed it but even he winced every once in a while when the car hit a bump in the road. The driver did not seem particularly familiar with Muggle inventions (such as cars) and so did not seem to understand that driving onto the sidewalk and off it would disturb his passengers, specifically those that had been injured by two of the three prisoners. Harry felt a little ashamed that he hadn't been quite so creative as his best friends in damaging the Aurors.

"Harry," Ron said in a light voice, "stop thinking so hard. You're going to have wrinkles between your eyes before you turn twenty."

“What would you know about wrinkles?” Harry asked in a surprised voice.

“Mum’s been driving us all insane about getting older. According to dad, she’s been going to Diagon Alley every two weeks or so, buying all of these miracle creams and potions to make herself look younger. Dad insists she’s even more beautiful than the day he met her. SHE insists that she needs all of that rubbish because after having all seven of us, there’s no way that she could have survived the atrocities of bearing and raising so many rowdy children without some battle scars to show for it. She said that Fred and George alone caused her enough grief for ten lifetimes of wrinkles and that she, as an educated, modern witch was fully prepared to do a little extra to make herself look her best. Dad could be a stick in the mud and not bother to impress anyone with his appearance but she was a woman, damnit, and she was going to look thirty if she could.” Hermione and Harry just stared at him. “I just thought I’d share,” Ron said, turning a little pink.

“Harry already has wrinkles,” Hermione said authoritatively. “Anyway, not as many as I do. Last month when I was researching in the library, I found a white hair! Can you believe it? I’m still a teenager! Why in Merlin’s name would I be having white hairs now? Can you honestly believe it?”

“Yes,” Ron and Harry said at the same time. Hermione’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Er,” Ron said, realizing the danger he was in. He was, after all, sitting right beside Hermione.

“What we mean is that you’ve always been mature for your age and you worry way too much about my safe – I mean, OUR safety. It was inevitable you’d start showing some signs of the stress,” Harry said much more elegantly. “Besides, didn’t you go to Greece right before I disappeared? Maybe you just... I don’t know, got some blonde hairs from being in the sun all the time?”

“You do like to sunbathe a lot,” Ron added.

“And you turned blonde when you came back in third year. It might just be a... a reaction to the sun,” Harry said.

“Do you really think so?” Hermione asked in an entirely different, intrigued tone of voice.

“Definitely,” Ron said. “It looks good on you too.”

“Hrm...” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Not so fast,” the Auror on Harry’s left said, lifting his wand to point directly at Hermione. “I see you moving your weight. If you think you can catch me off guard again, you will not have enough time to regret it.” Hermione leaned back carefully, resting her head on Ron’s shoulder again. Her face was blank and innocent.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ron said.

“Hermione’s not that kind of girl,” Harry added, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Your toe was just so awfully large back at the Ministry, and directly in my way; it’s your own fault it broke when I stepped on it,” Hermione said just as casually.

“This is going to be such a long bloody drive,” the Auror on Harry’s right said with a soft sigh. He winced when the car bounced, knocking the ice pack sharply against his purple bruise.

Albus Dumbledore was sitting quietly on a steel, uncomfortable-looking chair when Harry and his friends were pulled out of the Ministry car and into a small building. From the outside, it looked somewhat like a Muggle warehouse. There were patches of paint along the wall and some graffiti for two lovers (Joy and Martin, according to the squiggly words) but otherwise unnoticeable. The door opened with a soft spell from the taller of the Aurors and in they

went. The reception area was small but clean, with various chairs like the steel ones Dumbledore had just vacated. There was no artwork on the off-white walls and only a fake plant in the corner, drooping to one side, decorated the otherwise uninteresting room.

The Aurors, who had thus far refused to give their names, even when Ron had threatened them with singing (Hermione and Harry cringed both theatrically as well as in fear of their friend carrying out his threat) stared at Dumbledore as he rose calmly and walked towards the group. The Aurors stiffened and gripped Ron and Hermione's elbows harder as he approached.

Dumbledore felt an ache in his chest unfurl and relax when he saw the three students magically bound with their arms behind their backs and their wands confiscated. This was good, although not what he had initially wanted. He would have to continue to change his plan now that they were here. He did not show outwardly how nervous he felt, seeing three piercing glares directed at him.

"I am glad you have all arrived safely," Dumbledore said. He glanced at the Auror with the ice pack to his cheek and smiled sympathetically. "Well, nearly safe. The ferry is a little late but it shall arrive soon. The guards are preparing a cell for the students in one of the lower-security levels of Azkaban as we speak."

"Why is the ferry late?" asked the taller of the Aurors. Dumbledore turned his gentle smile on him.

"There has been some sort of issue between some other prisoners, an attempted riot I believe," Dumbledore said. "To my knowledge, it has already been resolved."

"Mr. Dumbledore," the shorter of the Aurors began, glancing wearily at Hermione, "we were given orders not to let anyone speak to the prisoners. Some of the Aurors, Kingsley and Tonks, tried to but we made sure that they could not communicate. We were also told that the prisoners are more dangerous than they appear, which is why we have been told not to disclose any personal information." He paused, waiting for some reaction to his words.

“Rightly so, those were my orders,” Dumbledore said firmly. The two Aurors nodded, relaxing slightly. Harry frowned. This wasn’t right. Why were they following Dumbledore’s orders? Wasn’t Fudge the Minister of Magic here or had he missed something? Since when did Aurors take orders from Dumbledore, especially when he was not at Hogwarts? In fact, why WASN’T he at Hogwarts? Wasn’t his business completed at the Ministry by now? Even more confusing, why were the Aurors speaking to him as if he was the person who needed to hear their reports?

“Are you sure that they are only low-security prisoners?” the taller of the Aurors asked, glaring at the back of Ron’s head. Ron didn’t move an inch, keeping his heated glare on Dumbledore’s face. Hermione, far more level-headed, had her eyes focused on Dumbledore’s hands. He had not reached for his wand but she wasn’t going to be surprised if he did.

“Do these children look as if they should be?” Dumbledore asked in a deceptively sweet voice.

“Bloody bastard,” Ron said firmly. The taller of the Aurors visibly stiffened, his eyes widening. The other’s lips thinned but otherwise he did not change. This was not behavior that they were used to seeing demonstrated in front of Dumbledore, as it turned out. Dumbledore, in turn, merely smiled serenely back at Ron.

“There is no need for hostility, Mr. Weasley. I thought you would appreciate a low-security cell instead of a high-security one in which the dementors are given permission to stand by your bed every hour. Do you not feel in the least bit grateful?”

“Are you serious?” Ron demanded, arching an eyebrow. “Are you bloody serious? Grateful? You actually think we should be grateful that you not only got us put into Azkaban, knowing very well that we’re not Death Eaters at all, putting Harry into even more danger after he told you everything that was going to happen in this bloody universe now that You-Know-Who from our universe is here and

causing all kinds of trouble... and you want us to be grateful that you got us a nice view of the ocean? Yeah, we're very grateful."

"I am sorry you feel that way," Dumbledore said. "But I am sure you will understand, in time. Has not the Dumbledore you know done something that you did not at first understand?"

"You aren't anything like the Dumbledore we know," Hermione said in a soft hiss. "Don't worry. I won't forget that. The next opportunity we get, we'll make sure not to forget." The words were more matter-of-fact than threatening, but the threat was clear.

Barry Gunter, the stocky blonde gripping Hermione's elbow, had never felt intimidated by criminals before. They thrashed, they screamed, they cursed everyone in sight, they stole, they lied, they did such unspeakably inhuman things to keep from going to Azkaban. He was not frightened by a single one of them, something that his therapist thought was unhealthy but Barry's wife thought only made her husband braver. Barry, however, felt a chill go up his spine at Hermione's words.

He and his partner, Mathew Marvel, were some of the toughest Aurors in the department. They handled most of the Death Eater cases, something that was not as difficult these days as it had been years ago when the Dark Lord had run amuck all over Europe. He'd even met the Dark Lord once, when he'd been young and stupid. Barry even had the scars on his back to prove it. But he had never been as frightened as when he felt the aura of strength around the three prisoners. They were children, he reminded himself, but they were not scared of Azkaban. EVERYONE was scared of Azkaban, especially when they knew what it was. These children KNEW, and they were not afraid. Or, Barry reflected, they didn't care.

"I am disappointed in you, Ms. Granger," Dumbledore said in a humble voice. "I do not understand why you would presume to think I am the villain in this situation. I am merely ensuring the safety of the Ministry members you came into contact with. As I recall, Mr.

Weasley attacked some of the Aurors who came to speak with you and you yourself cursed many fine men and women.”

“Don’t pretend that you don’t know why we’re pissed,” Ron hissed.

“You were assisting Azkaban escapees,” Dumbledore said. “It was my duty to ensure that they were captured and returned to Azkaban and that those responsible for aiding them were also punished for their actions. I did not expect for you to fight your arrest quite as persistently as you did.”

“You didn’t catch them,” Harry interrupted, grinning broadly. “You didn’t catch mum or dad or Sirius. They’re too smart for you. Good, I hope you never catch them.”

“We DID catch them,” Dumbledore said, his face softening with kindness. “They are already in Azkaban. We found them long before I told the Aurors that you were in the Ministry. You should not think so much ill of me, Harry. I needed to lure them to the Ministry’s heart so that their capture would be swift and painless. There are only so many places to hide when you are surrounded by Aurors.”

“LIAR,” Harry hissed, his eyes flashing angrily. “You can lie and lie but I will NEVER believe you again! I know they escaped and I know you will NEVER catch them. EVER!”

“You may believe what you will,” Dumbledore said. “But in the meantime, I must ask that you not give the guards a reason to separate you from your friends. They will not hesitate to place you in a higher security cell and they certainly will not mind placing you in entirely separate wings of the prison. You will remain there for several days, until you have decided that you are willing to speak sensibly about this subject. Until then, I will inform your parents of where you are. You don’t want them to know... do you?”

“Go right ahead,” Ron said, smirking. “I can’t wait to see the look on my dad’s face when you tell him there are now two Ronald Weasleys and one of them is in prison.” He glanced at the short Auror (he did

not know that his name was Barry) and said "Make sure to tell me all about when my mum tears him apart."

"I see that you will need a long time to come to your senses," Dumbledore said, his voice hardening, "but I assure you that I have every intention of leaving you here to rot if I must."

"Careful, Dumbledore," Harry said, his lip twitching, "your temper is showing."

Voldemort rested his hand on Nagini's head, staring at Lucius Malfoy as if he'd just said he had changed his ways and decided to marry a Muggle. "So the Potter boy arrived at the waiting station for Azkaban without a problem. And he only had an escort of two Aurors when there were three prisoners. And... they are waiting for the ferry without anyone around to protect them or direct any of their activities."

"Yes, sir," Lucius said, his eyes gradually traveling from his new master to the young man standing beside him. Draco Malfoy (Lucius could not picture this stranger as his own Draco, his own son, safe in Hogwarts at that moment) seemed particularly intrigued by this bit of news. He had a nearly identical expression on his face as the Dark Lord.

"He could not be so much a fool," Draco said. "He just... he couldn't be so stupid."

"I am having trouble accepting it as well," Voldemort said, thinking about all he had heard. Some of the younger Death Eaters had brought him some old copies of the Daily Prophet, to see if perhaps the Dumbledore of this universe had lived a different life than the Dumbledore that Voldemort and Draco knew. It didn't seem possible that this Dumbledore could appear to be the same person but at the same time demonstrate such a complete disregard for stealth and intelligence but, Voldemort admitted to himself, it was possible that this Dumbledore's life had been entirely different and thus had developed an entirely different personality. There was nothing in the Daily Prophet or any other materials that were brought to him that

suggested why this Dumbledore was quite so different. It was disorienting.

“I can think of twenty ways off the top of my head how we can destroy Potter and his friends right now. He practically put HIMSELF into a trap,” Draco said.

“It is possible that he has purposefully created this situation AS a trap,” Voldemort said thoughtfully, stroking Nagini’s scaled head. Lucius followed Voldemort’s hand, noticing how at times the Dark Lord lifted his fingers and petted Draco as if he too was a pet. It was disturbing on a level Lucius could not contemplate.

“Are we sure we’re not giving the old coot too much credit?” Draco asked, giving no reaction to being petted like an animal. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the attention. “Perhaps he isn’t as intelligent as the Dumbledore we know. Perhaps this is really the best that he can do and we’re thinking too much into his actions.”

“This is maddening,” Voldemort said, his voice a tad exasperated. “Too smart, too dumb, it’s difficult to tell. For now, I will allow this single opportunity to pass.” Draco’s lips thinned and he narrowed his eyes.

“As you wish,” Draco said. His tone, however, did not seem to agree with his words. He sounded very much as if he wanted to go there right that moment and kill them all without a second thought. He had more self control, Lucius noted, than the Draco he knew.

Part of Lucius knew that he should have been exceedingly proud of his son. Looking at him now, he knew that the young man had surpassed him in pretty much everything he’d ever done. This stranger was literally the right hand of the Dark Lord, he feared nothing, and he seemed to possess (and achieve) his own agenda. Lucius was very aware of Ginny Weasley locked away in the room Draco had been given in the Riddle Manor and, although even the Dark Lord had asked Draco about seeing her, Draco had thus far managed to keep the girl to himself.

Lucius, however, did not feel proud of the Draco Malfoy he saw before him. He certainly felt respect for him, even admired him a little. He exuded strength and power and looked every inch the Pureblood, Dark wizard he was. This was something that the Draco Malfoy he knew would never become. This was something that Lucius had told his son, countless times, that he wanted. He'd asked for just this, a madman's violence but a killer's focus. He, Lucius realized, reflected what Voldemort's child would have been, had the Dark Lord ever bothered to have children.

No, he did not feel proud of Draco. He felt terrified of him.

"For now," Voldemort was saying, "we shall allow them to go to Azkaban. I suspect the place will be good for the brats and the irony feels right." Voldemort smirked, relishing in the sense of triumph over Potter. At the same time, a part of him screamed in outrage that Potter wasn't dead already. "I want to speak to those close to Dumbledore. Bring me victims, bring me informants. I want to know exactly what makes this Dumbledore tick. And I want to know just who I am dealing with. If he is smarter than I think he is, I want to take this into account before we storm Azkaban and walk into a trap that we are not prepared for. If I had my loyal Death Eaters with me, this would not be an issue. However, as I am working with inferior warriors," he glanced mildly at those assembled around him, "I shall wait. Right now, he has more information than I do. I do not like this."

The meeting thus ended. Lucius casually walked towards Draco but the stranger merely turned away and walked back towards his rooms. What, Lucius wondered, was so fascinating about Ginny Weasley?

Chapter 42: Reinforcements: Part 1

The sky held the promise of rain. This was no problem, Remus was accustomed to rain. He didn't so much as flinch when the first icy drop hit his nose. He ignored it as he flew low to the ground, dodging trees with ease as he flew. The night sky was bright with street lights and homes just beyond the trees, allowing some assistance to Remus's eyes as he glided to a halt just at the edge of the trees. He knew very well what a huge risk he was taking right now, coming so close to people when everyone was looking for him.

'They're free,' he reminded himself, his usually stoic lips twitching upward in a smile. 'They swore they would contact me whenever they had a chance and they have. They're free.'

It had been a difficult lifetime since he'd been with his family, it felt like a half-forgotten dream. James and Lily's smiling faces, Harry gurgling up to him adoringly, Sirius barking with laughter... it seemed so long ago. Sometimes he thought that he'd only dreamed them up. But then he saw it in the Daily Prophet on his way to one of his many "special" clients and... there it was. The message he'd been waiting years for. "MEET US AT THE BEGINNING." There was no signature, nothing else – it was in the advice column of Martha Magalia, one of the few people who still thought they were all innocent of the horrible crimes staked against the Potters and Black.

That was why he stood here now on the rubble of Godric's Hollow, perhaps waiting for a trap, perhaps waiting for a miracle. He didn't much care one way or the other, he'd been waiting so long for something to happen to break the mundane, repetitive, endless nature of his days. He just wanted something to put him out of his misery.

That wasn't true, Remus reflected. Seeing that note in the Daily Prophet had just made him go soft. He'd missed his friends a great deal but he certainly hadn't remained hidden and useless for all this time. He was gathering forces, preparing to break his friends out of Azkaban if he needed, but he'd given his friends a chance to get out themselves so that no one would be hurt.

Remus heard a soft flutter of a cloak behind him and, based purely on instinct, drew his gun from the holster and aimed. His finger paused on the trigger, remembering where he was and who he'd been waiting for. Sirius's grinning face stared back at him, his hands a little raised with his palms showing.

"Easy, Moony," Sirius said, his voice raspy. "You sure you want to kill me after all I've had to do just to get here?"

Remus relaxed, his eyes softening as a smile touched his lips. His face protested. How long had it been since he'd smiled? He lowered his gun slowly but did not tuck it away into its holster. As happy as Remus was to see Sirius, a voice in the back of his mind reminded him not to be stupid. There was no way he could know for sure that this was Sirius Black, the Sirius Black he'd known almost his entire life, until there'd been time to test him. He would do this subtly, but he would also allow Sirius to rest at ease.

"That's better," Sirius said with a grin. "What is that thing anyway?" He peered down at Remus's hand curiously, head tilted a little so that he resembled a curious dog. Something tightened in Remus's throat when he saw that all-too familiar look and struggled with his emotions. It had been so long since he'd seen Sirius do that, something he hadn't seen in so many years.

"I've missed you," Remus said, smiling again. Sirius smiled back but did not approach, his hands resting lightly against his thighs. Remus, as much as he wanted to believe the best of his friend, could not help but notice that Sirius's hands were not empty either. He held a wand, probably stolen from someone trying to capture him, by his side in a light grip. Or at least it looked like a light grip but Remus knew better, understood that Sirius was protecting himself just as much as Remus was. This made him completely relax and holster the gun, grinning.

"I missed you too," Sirius said, grinning wider now. This was more natural. They'd both passed their own individual tests, being just as suspicious of the other as if they were not the person they'd been claiming to be. "And this," Remus said, motioning to his side, "is a Muggle weapon called a gun. Running in the Muggle world leads to

needing Muggle protection when I don't want anyone catching me use magic."

"Makes sense," Sirius said. "Maybe you'll teach me how to use one sometime. I'd like to have something else to defend myself with other than my wand."

"Sounds like you've been having a rough time," Remus said, his eyes slightly narrowed. He peered into the darkness of the woods but couldn't see or hear anything except the distant sound of opera playing out of someone's window. The sleepy town seemed completely oblivious to the two new inhabitants it sported, conversing in the dead of night. "Where are... Lily and James? I thought they would be with you."

"We had to split up for practical reasons," Sirius said, a note of worry entering his voice. He sighed and scratched the top of his head with the tip of his wand, his eyes distant and distracted. "We wouldn't have called you, Remus, not this soon. There's still a lot of heat on us for escaping Azkaban and we wanted to come to you when things were a little quieter, a little safer... but we need you."

"What can I possibly do for you now that I couldn't do for you when you were still imprisoned?" Remus asked incredulously. He couldn't believe his ears. Was Sirius joking? How much more worthless in this fight could Remus have been? He stood by and allowed all of his best friends to completely disappear and he did not fight once to get Harry back for them. In fact, he was too cowardly to even approach Anne Pettigrew's house to catch a glimpse of Harry. He'd only ever seen the boy one time, on a night similar to this one, when he'd accidentally walked a little too close to Hogsmead on his way north. Other than that, he hadn't done a single noteworthy thing for his friends. That is... aside from amass a group of loyal fighters who were willing to break the Potters and Black out of prison. That seemed pretty useless at the moment.

"It's about Harry," Sirius said, his eyes bleak. "You aren't going to believe what happened when we saw him."

Remus sucked in a sharp breath through his nose. He looked around carefully and walked closer to Sirius, lowering his voice in case anyone might overhear them. He often felt this way in his daily life, when he asked people he met if they'd heard anything about Harry at Hogwarts. He'd heard some strange things recently, chalking it up to bad information, but had there been something there he should have paid more attention to? Had something happened that he should have been aware of – and had failed to prevent? He would never forgive himself.

“What is it? Is Harry alright? Did you meet him? What's he like?” Remus asked, curiosity winning over. At a bleak look from Sirius, he abruptly shut up and waited.

“He died,” Sirius admitted. Remus felt the blood drain from his face and he reached out immediately to comfort Sirius. Thinking of Lily and James, Remus felt the guilt of his failure heavily on his shoulders.

“Dear Merlin... Sirius... I had no idea. I'm so... I'm so sorry I couldn't-,”

“Hang on, I haven't explained anything yet,” Sirius said, blinking in astonishment at Remus. Remus, confused by his friend's strange reaction, waited again. “The Harry we know is dead, or at least he might as well be. From what I found out, there are two students that used to be Harry's friends: Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley.”

“Weasley?” Remus echoed. “Do you mean Arthur Weasley's son? What does the boy have anything to do with Harry's death?” This was really getting confusing. Sirius sighed and shook his head again.

“It IS confusing,” Sirius admitted. “I don't completely understand what happened but I'm going to explain it as best I can. Harry only managed to get a little out before we had to go to the Ministry and a whole lot of other problems landed in our lap. You wouldn't believe the amount of danger Harry can get himself into without even trying.”

Remus, pretty sure that his brain was going to explode if Sirius didn't decide to make some sense, just waited for Sirius to get around to

explaining himself. He'd been like this at Hogwarts too, Remus reflected. Sirius tended to have a slightly disorganized thought process and therefore jumped from thought to thought without bothering to include other people in the process. This tended to illicit some interestingly complicated situations, such as when he blurted out certain endearments to girls he hadn't even asked out yet, called other people names based on conversations he'd only had in his own mind, and came to conclusions far sooner than anyone else did. Right now, it was driving Remus insane.

"The two students, Ron and Hermione," Sirius said, noting the patiently annoyed expression on his friend's face, "used some sort of dark spell while doing a class project. This brought another Harry from another universe into this one."

Remus waited, unsure if this was a joke or if Sirius had merely confused so many details together that he'd just decided to make something up. When Sirius showed no signs of correcting himself, Remus's eyes widened.

"It isn't possible to bring people from another universe into this universe. There isn't such thing as another universe," Remus said reasonably.

"That's how it was explained to me," Sirius said, arching an eyebrow. "Even Snape believes all of this. You haven't seen the new Harry... he's very obviously not from around here. The amount of power he holds is... astonishing. He makes Dumbledore nervous, for Merlin's sake." Sirius scowled at some memory. Remus couldn't concentrate on his friend's suddenly irritated attitude, too absorb in trying to figure out how to respond.

"Sirius," Remus said, "I've done research on this before."

"You... you have?" Sirius demanded, his eyes widening. "You've done research on other universes?"

"I told you, there isn't a such thing as another universe," Remus said patiently.

“WHY? When?” Sirius demanded, his jaw hanging open a little. Remus couldn’t help but smile a little, surprised by the warmth that filled him. No one talked to him like that anymore, with total disbelief and awe. Mostly people just skirted him in the street or treated him like some infectious disease. Sirius just stared at him as if he were any other crazy person spouting nonsense.

“Remember that James got an internship at the Department of Mysteries a little after we left Hogwarts?” Remus asked. Sirius nodded dumbly. “I asked James to check it out for me because his father was so involved in the Ministry. When he told me he thought it would be interesting, I spoke with James’s dad and he helped get me an internship there. I did research in the time room for a long time,” Remus mentally cringed at the pun, he’d heard it all before, “and that ties in to the study of other universes.”

“How does time tie in to... to other universes?” Sirius demanded, his eyes still a little wide.

“The theory,” Remus explained, falling into his old role as professor, “is that time and space do not exist. They are essentially the same thing, a form of thought linked specifically to the minds of humans. Our brains are so sophisticated, we perceive something called “time” and “matter” based on what we conjure from our daily experiences. This means,” Remus said quickly, seeing how panicked Sirius was starting to look, “that when we see an apple for example, it isn’t really there. Our minds are so advanced, we create the apple. Therefore, we can hold it. Because we have decided that it exists.”

“You’re saying that I’m just... imagining this rock,” Sirius said, kicking the rock by his foot, “and therefore it exists. For me to kick it.”

“In a very simplified version of the theory, yes,” Remus said, seeing the disbelief on Sirius’s face. He could see the cogs turning in Sirius’s head and he knew the exact moment that he gave up on trying to understand.

“Someone,” Sirius said, “has been having a little too much Firewhiskey, me thinks. Who came up with that load of bollocks anyway? Like I said, I’ve seen the evidence first-hand. Those idiots at the Department of Mysteries never got out much and if they were basing all of their theories on books that other people wrote who had no idea what they were even talking about...” Sirius paused for breath, scowling, “it just doesn’t make sense, that’s all. They don’t know what they’re talking about and I don’t understand any of it anyway.”

“I told you, that’s the theory,” Remus said. “I have no idea what the reality is anymore than they did. They were merely speculating based on the best information they had. And since they had access to every single book in existence, even the Dark Arts books, the Department of Mysteries was the best-informed group of nerds you could imagine.”

“Well, they’re nonsensical nerds,” Sirius said a little waspishly. “Nothing you said made any sense to me.”

“That’s the theory,” Remus pressed. “Admittedly, it’s a very digested, paraphrased version of it. I don’t remember too much about my internship but one of the big breakthroughs was that someone had both mathematically and magically proven that other universes don’t exist.”

“How can that be true when I just SAW Harry? The other Harry?” Sirius demanded. “What does it matter if the man mathematically proved that pudding and tarantulas go well together? You said it yourself that the theory is different than the practice. And besides, what does any of this have to do with apples existing or not existing?”

“That’s just a way of explaining it,” Remus said, rubbing his forehead tiredly. “The idea is that the universe only exists in the minds of people. We decide that this is our reality, this is our body, this is our surroundings.” He gestured to the surrounding trees and the rubble at their feet. “It stands to reason that other universes do not exist, that we have merely created the idea of it because we cannot account for all the other possibilities of life. What if we turned

left instead of right? What if we married her instead of the other one? Different universes are considered separate realities, another person's perspective on what reality should be. The idea though is that that perspective still exists in this universe and, therefore, there is only one universe with multiple realities."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," Sirius said, his eyes still very wide. "None of it makes sense and it's all hogwash anyway. I told you I saw the other Harry, I saw his friends Hermione and Ron from the other universe at the same time and place that I saw the Ron and Hermione of THIS universe, I saw the Draco Malfoy of that other universe, and, if Harry is right, the Dark Lord of his universe has followed him here. So now there are TWO Dark Lords."

Remus froze mid-protest. He'd been about to explain the theory of other universes again, hoping to force the information into Sirius's head, but this made him pause. He'd seen the two completely separate entities beside each other – one Ron versus the other Ron? There was another Dark Lord? Remus itched to start researching, extremely curious about how this could all work. He too had thought the theory a little limited but he'd never had any proof (nor had any other member of the Department) that proved anything one way or the other.

"Sirius," Remus said, frowning. "What did you mean that you need my help?" Maybe changing the subject for now was best. They were rusty right now, completely unaccustomed to being around each other again. Where had their easy intuitiveness gone? Once upon a time, they'd read each other's minds.

Sirius sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I certainly didn't come here to listen while you prattled on about things I've never even heard of before."

"Then what are we doing here? And why aren't James and Lily with you?" Remus demanded, feeling frustrated and a touch useless again. He wanted to ask another question, a much angrier question. He wanted to ask: what can I do this time? The helplessness pressed down on his chest.

“Harry and his friends from the other universe have been arrested. They’re in Azkaban right now.” Sirius said with another hint of anger. His hand clenched around his borrowed wand.

“What?” Remus demanded. “Why? What did they do?”

“Nothing,” Sirius said, his eyes narrowing with anger. “But we could sure use your friends right about now to break them out.”

Chapter 43: Dark Interlude

Malfoy just couldn't understand it. He was currently perched on a blissfully plush armchair beside the fireplace, staring at Ginny Weasley sleeping about five feet away from him on the queen sized bed. She'd curled onto her side, her hair fanning out to frame her face in red. Her legs had tangled in the blankets and her pillows were on the floor now after some tossing and turning. Much as Malfoy tried to understand, he just could not comprehend it. How could his counterpart in this universe like Weasley? What was so appealing about her? She looked utterly ridiculous with her mouth hanging open and the way she half snorted during a nightmare, twisting around on her other side. It worried him that some piece of him, somewhere out there, found this creature alluring.

"My lord," a sniveling voice by the door said. Malfoy rose gracefully from his seat and went to the door, speaking through the crack.

"What is it?" Malfoy whispered softly. He scowled at himself, annoyed that he'd be worried about waking the girl on the bed. It suddenly occurred to him that just hearing that a relationship between them was possible was making him THINK it was already happening. He forced himself to ignore her as much as possible.

"The Dark Lord wishes to see the girl. He says that you have been keeping her a secret on purpose," Pettigrew said, a hint of smug satisfaction entering his voice. Malfoy didn't say anything, merely stared at him. After an entire minute of this, Pettigrew lowered his head and stared at his feet, his cheeks burning. "I didn't think you were doing that..."

"Coward," Malfoy said in such a disregarding, uninterested voice that Pettigrew ducked his head further. It felt so much worse... that complete lack of emotion. "Tell the Dark Lord that he is welcome to come here whenever he pleases. He is Master here and I have only kept her out of his way so that he can better plan his next move against Potter. I will be waiting for him at his leisure."

“O-Of course,” Pettigrew practically groaned, slinking away as soon as possible. Malfoy watched him go, remaining perfectly still. He didn’t consciously know why he did this. Subconsciously, he rebelled against the feelings he realized were growing within him. He knew that he didn’t like Ginny Weasley, couldn’t possibly love her, but now the option was there. It made him curious about her, made her harder to kill because he didn’t just look over her as he always had. He knew instinctively that letting her live would make his job harder.

Reluctantly turning back to the room, he walked towards the bed. Ginny Weasley was wide awake and staring at him with cold, calculating eyes. He walked straight towards her, subconsciously deciding that she wasn’t worth being worried about, and stared down at her. They stared at each other for a long moment, neither willing to break eye contact first.

“It’s really weird not to think of you romantically,” Ginny said without changing her expression.

“It’s really weird not to think about killing you,” Malfoy quipped right back. They stared at each other again without blinking. Finally Ginny sighed and looked away, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Malfoy blinked, continuing to watch her.

“Look, can we not do this? I get enough of the hostility at school without YOU adding to it. I thought... after we got together, that I could count on at least you not giving me a look like I’m something disgusting,” Ginny said. Malfoy thought to point out that he DID think she was disgusting but instead waited, noting that she had more to say. “It’s just hard for me, okay? You look exactly like him of course, but you’re so different from him at the same time. It’s disorienting and it... it really sucks.”

Malfoy couldn’t help it. His lip twitched into an unwilling smile. This distressed him.

“As I recall,” Malfoy said, forcing the emotion from his face for fear that she would see his amusement, “you are one of the golden

children of Gryffindor. Why in the world would people hate you? Especially if you've been taken in by Potter's group-,"

"Things are different here," Ginny said, cutting him off sharply. "Harry isn't famous here. Harry is a sniveling, cowardly jerk who can't even protect himself, let alone anyone else." Malfoy found himself fascinated with her anger. She was becoming more interesting.

"It sounds as if he crossed you in some way," Malfoy observed.

"In my first year, I got suspended because I'd attacked a student," Ginny said. Malfoy's eyebrows went up. "I was possessed!" she said quickly, seeing the expression on his face. When Malfoy continued to stare at her, Ginny's cheeks turned a little pink. "Not that they didn't deserve it. But I got suspended for it and nearly kicked out of Hogwarts. I'm on probation right now and I've been told that anything, even a detention, will get me kicked out. The OTHER Harry's response to this was telling on me every time I so much as looked at him sideways."

Malfoy really couldn't help it this time. He started laughing so hard, he thought he'd break something. Ginny looked up at him, obviously just as surprised by his reaction as he was. Malfoy struggled for several moments to regain control, clenching his fists even as he chuckled to himself. "I can't even imagine that... I just can't. Potter, coward... like that. I can't even see it."

"Yeah... the Harry you know isn't like that at all," Ginny said softly.

"No better," Malfoy said snidely. "I don't understand why everyone hero-worships him. He breaks more rules than anyone I know, with the blessing of every professor in the school, nearly gets his friends killed at every turn, and all the while plays the victim when one person calls him on it."

"I wouldn't know," Ginny said, scowling. "All I know is that he was the first person to treat me like I wasn't dangerous, for once. Even my brother Ron ignores me now, like I'm his poisonous sister or the bad egg of the family."

“The Weasel...” Malfoy began, “never did have too many brains.”

“Yeah,” Ginny said, with feeling, “it’s why he bothered to make friends with Hermione at all. He cheats off her at every opportunity. He doesn’t even LIKE her.”

“Funny,” Malfoy observed, “in my universe, they’re so sickeningly in love with each other.” Ginny’s eyes widened. “It wasn’t a surprise,” Malfoy said, noting her expression. “They’ve been showing signs of the lovey dovey stuff since first year. It was sickening.”

“I’ll bet,” Ginny said, half smiling. Malfoy froze. Oh, he was bonding. He was BONDING. With Ginny Weasley. The thought drove a stake of terror through him and, without pausing to think, he walked out of the room. Ginny stared after him, wide eyed.

Malfoy waited outside of the room, pressing his forehead against the wall, and reasoned with himself. He hadn’t thought about people as anything more than targets and canon-fodder for so long that now, having to keep Weasley alive for bait, was forcing him to think of something new. It was also difficult to separate what he knew to be the truth of his universe and the twisted history of this one. It made this more confusing. Taking a deep, steadying breath, Malfoy worked to deaden his feelings.

“What is wrong, Draco?” the voice soothed him. Centered him. Malfoy turned to the Dark Lord, his master, and smiled weakly.

“Forgive me, Master,” he said softly, “the Weasley girl is... affecting me. I do not completely understand it but I believe I can master the problem.”

“You may be experiencing some of your counterpart’s feelings,” the Dark Lord said, resting a hand on Malfoy’s shoulder. “At your first opportunity, you should kill him. That was the only way I could maintain my composure. You will find that standing beside him will make the feelings more intense but, when you can, kill him.”

“Yes, sir,” Malfoy said softly. His shoulders relaxed and he even smiled up at his Master. This was the explanation for his problem, this easy explanation of why he was feeling so strange. He had a solution now. He had a path now.

“Let me see the girl,” the Dark Lord said, his voice a touch affectionate. He was so perfect, Voldemort secretly thought with pride. He was such a good servant, so honest when he needed to be, so ready to accept orders without a single protest. He allowed his affection for Draco to grow over time when he saw how loyal the boy was, how dedicated and full of hatred he was for Potter’s blood. It was invigorating, satisfying even, to have someone hate Potter as much as he did.

Ginny drew back when she saw who came through the door. It wasn’t just Malfoy, as she’d thought, coming back from whatever had scared him off in the first place. It was You-Know-Who coming towards her with a curious look on his face. Ginny didn’t want to but she couldn’t stop herself from looking him over, finding strange things to notice about the most feared Dark Lord in the history of time. He was exceedingly tall with narrow, rounded shoulders and slightly pointed ears. Although his red eyes were terrifying, his long pianist fingers were beautiful. He walked with a grace Ginny envied and did not fear anything.

“Hello Ginny Weasley,” the Dark Lord said in a voice that sent a thrill through her body. It was not a thrill of joy but rather a thrill of dread. She recognized the voice, one she thought she would never hear again. With a stuttering gasp, she sat straight up.

“T-Tom!” she said.

“You will address him properly,” Malfoy said in a dangerous tone of voice. Ginny’s eyes twisted fearfully towards him but there was no emotion in his icy eyes. In fact, he wasn’t even looking at her anymore. He was looking up at the Dark Lord as if he were some god descended from the heavens. He looked at the Dark Lord as one would look upon a being above and beyond imagination, worth

worshipping, worth dying for. Ginny's eyes widened as she looked back at the Dark Lord.

"S-Sorry," Ginny mumbled. "It's just... you sound like... someone I know."

"Who would that be?" the Dark Lord asked curiously. "I was not aware that my previous name was such public knowledge."

"I... what?" Ginny gasped.

"Tom," the Dark Lord said patiently. His eyes, although terrifying, were soft and welcoming. He wanted to listen to her. He was inviting her to speak. "My previous name... before I took the name Voldemort."

"You can't be the Tom I know," Ginny mumbled, staring at him. "He... he isn't alive anymore. It was just his memory in an old diary I found. He... he tried to possess me. His name was Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"So you WERE the one who found my diary," the Dark Lord said with interest. Ginny's eyes widened and she looked over the Dark Lord again. The hands... those were what gave him away. The way he tilted his head as he listened. The way his words seemed to reach beyond her ears to some primal part of her being. "You must be a special girl, for my diary self to show itself to you."

"Tom used me for his own gain," Ginny said, half reciting what years of therapy had uncovered. She used these words now as a talisman, fighting off the flattery she felt building at his words. "He just wanted me because I listened to him."

"That cannot be the whole reason he chose you," the Dark Lord said reasonably. "Nor can it be the only reason that Draco brought you here. There must be something special about you, Ginny Weasley, that would draw Draco's attention as well as Harry Potter's. They are not easily impressed."

“Harry’s just protective,” Ginny said, feeling her arguments grow weaker before she even said them. There was something going on inside her head. It seemed that every time she thought of some argument, some bit of information to fight off the Dark Lord’s reasoning, it would simply fade away from her mind. She felt herself leaning closer to the Dark Lord, completely against her will. It was such a quiet persuasion but she realized it was happening. “He... he is a good person. He saw me for who I really am.”

“Who are you, Ginny Weasley? And more importantly, what is it that you really want? Do you think that defending Potter when he has betrayed you all of your life somehow reflects well on you? Potter will continue to use you and pretend to see you. I DO see you as you are. I can see your potential. My diary self would not have picked you unless there was something within you to draw me. Let me bring out your potential. Let me guide you, as my diary self guided you.”

Ginny realized, with dawning horror, that this Tom was a thousand times more charming, more seductive, more interesting than the Tom she’d met so many years ago. She knew she was susceptible to him and she knew that if she let him talk her into listening to him, she would be trapped under his influence forever. With a tremendous force of will, Ginny forced herself to remember the night that Tom nearly killed her. She forced herself to remember every single thing he said to her, every insult, every poisonous word she had spent years healing from. When she did, she forced the Dark Lord from her mind and her power swelled within her.

“When Harry gets here,” Ginny said softly, narrowing her eyes with hate, “he will kill you. And I will enjoy it.”

The Dark Lord’s face hardened and the anger in his eyes showed. He’d underestimated the girl. So many of the people in this universe were so weak, he hardly bothered to expend any amount of energy on them. This girl, however, had barricaded her mind against him. He couldn’t even force his way in with Legilimency. He glanced at Draco, his eyes furious.

“If you will not listen to reason,” Voldemort said, “then perhaps you will be better suited for Draco’s practice. He has not tortured someone in many weeks. It will not do for him to get rusty.”

“Shall I use magic?” Draco asked, his voice sounding interested. “Or shall I be creative?”

“It is your decision,” Voldemort said. Ginny Weasley’s eyes widened. The deranged spark in Malfoy’s eyes had returned. She could practically see her future unfolding before her and she realized that at that moment, she was doomed. But she wouldn’t go out without a fight. “Enjoy yourself,” Voldemort said as he walked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 45: Reinforcements: Part 2

Harry thought that the sky didn't look half-bad staring out of a cell in Azkaban. He would have expected storms and raging lightning flashes, anguished screaming, monsters clinking through the hallways... but honestly, Azkaban wasn't so bad. The cells were unreasonably small, it's true, and the bunks were no more than wet blankets strewn against a corner away from the window, but it was quiet. Sure, the dementors sucked out every single pleasant thought that popped into his mind but honestly, he'd expected something worse. He was disappointed.

"Harry, stop... you'll hurt yourself," Hermione whispered to him. She was across the small corridor in the corner farthest from the door, shivering uncontrollably. Harry looked down at his hands, trying to understand what she was referring to, when he realized that his fingernails were bleeding. He'd been picking at the wall restlessly, thinking of how easy it was to sit in Azkaban, how peaceful in fact it was, and here he'd been scraping the skin off his hands the whole time. Harry scowled and pulled his hands away from the wall.

"We'll get out of here soon," Ron insisted. He was in the cell beside Hermione's. Instead of staying back in the pseudo-safety of the far wall, he was leaning eagerly against the bars of his cell. His eyes were a little too wide but otherwise he'd taken Azkaban relatively well. How long had it been? Harry wondered. How many years had they been trapped in their cells?

It couldn't have been years. It had to have been... days. Maybe even hours. Harry rested his head on his arms, clenching his aching hands into his sides to keep them from doing something they shouldn't. That was the thing about Azkaban... time didn't seem to exist for long when you were inside. He had to laugh at himself for the flippant way he'd thought of Azkaban in the past. Sure, he'd seen Hagrid when he came back after a few short weeks. Sure he'd seen how it destroyed Sirius when he finally got out. And of course he'd seen the other Sirius and his parents and how screwed up they'd been when they got out. It wouldn't affect him that way, he'd thought.

“I don’t think I much like Azkaban,” Harry said thoughtfully. Ron snickered from the other cell but the sound choked off sharply. A dementor, sensing the single happy moment going on, swept by and stood next to Ron’s cell. Ron, with surprising bravery, did not scuttle back into his cell like Harry would have done. The dementor remained, hovering over Ron for a few long moments and then moved away. Ron was left pale and shaking but with a stubborn expression on his face.

“Are you alright?” Hermione whispered from beside him. She’d scooted away from the corner once the dementor left. She stuck her hand through the bars and threaded her fingers with Ron’s. Ron twisted his head sharply, as if he hadn’t known she was there all along.

“You shouldn’t be so close to me,” Ron said softly. “It’ll come back.” Despite his words, he tightened his fist over her fingers. Harry felt the cool metal against his forehead before he realized he’d moved forward. He wanted so badly to reach out towards them and touch their hands. It looked very appealing then with the cold and the loneliness sneaking in on them.

“It doesn’t make a difference,” Hermione said softly, grinning at him. “We’ll get through this,” she said, looking at Harry. The set of her mouth showed her stubbornness on the subject. It wasn’t happy, it was cold fact. Harry felt a sense of relief seeing that look on Hermione’s face. He’d forgotten for a long time how much he relied on people like Hermione and Ron to keep him together. He would get through this, with them.

“What I want to know,” Ron said, interrupting Harry’s thoughts, “is how that bastard Dumbledore could have done this to us. OUR Dumbledore never would have betrayed us like that, pretending we were evil when he knew that we weren’t.”

“Harry,” Hermione said apprehensively, “speaking of Dumbledore, how in the world did you get the Dark Mark?”

“When Voldemort came through, he used Malfoy to possess me. At some point, he put the Mark on me while I wasn’t myself. He used my own wand to do it,” Harry said, fighting down his anger. He couldn’t help feeling the underlying accusation in Hermione’s words, the “did you do it on purpose?” that was under all the worry. Hermione didn’t bother to hide her relief either. That was the thing about Azkaban – it was difficult to lie when you could never cling to a single good thing for more than a few moments.

“What are you asking, Mione?” Ron demanded angrily. “You think he would turn to Voldemort’s side just like that? After everything we’ve been through?” He ripped his hand away from hers, moving away from her cell. Hermione reached for his hand, a pained expression coming over her features.

“Ron, that’s not what I meant! I needed to know if Harry is still with us. If he was marked, it could have just as easily meant that the Voldemort of this time may have put him under Imperius.”

“Harry never stays under Imperius for long!” Ron said hotly, standing. The dementor at the end of the hallway drifted towards them but then seemed to find something far more appealing in the other direction. Harry barely noticed it (it was impossible not to notice it, the dementors had a presence about them that made ignoring them impossible).

“Ron, calm down,” Hermione said. “I know that Harry doesn’t stay under Imperius for long. In OUR universe. We had no idea what this world would be like until we got here. Until the point that we came here and started learning what was going on, there’s no way we could have known for certain. There were so many problems with this journey to find Harry, it was one of the thousands of things I was worried about! What would you have done if we were in the wrong universe and the Harry we found was a Death Eater?”

“Harry would never be a Death Eater,” Ron said, turning bright red with rage.

“But what if we went to a universe where he WAS a Death Eater? By birth and circumstance and anything else? We couldn’t turn our back on anyone, even if in our world they were trustworthy. Just look at what happened with Dumbledore! If we hadn’t trusted him, if we’d just tried to fix things on our own without asking for his help or telling him anything, we wouldn’t be in Azkaban right now. If we’d come here and Harry hadn’t been the Harry that WE knew, it could have been even worse. I HAD to ask him about the Mark.”

“Ron, it’s okay,” Harry said. Ron spluttered but didn’t say another word, glaring darkly at the wall. Hermione reached for him again but he refused to touch her fingers again. Harry felt ashamed for his early feelings about Hermione’s suspicion. It was true, he could see it now on her face. She hadn’t intended to be cruel to Harry, only to protect herself and Ron from a possible miscalculation. They were working with multiple universe theories and magic that had never been positively researched or tested. It was a miracle they’d found him at all, and only through his connection to Voldemort had any of this been possible. Who was he to be angry with Hermione for thinking rationally in a situation that warranted such behavior?

“I really don’t like Azkaban,” Hermione said miserably.

“Ron,” Harry said when his best friend didn’t react, “listen Ron. Hermione’s right. She’s ALWAYS right.” Ron snorted but it was a rueful sound. “She’s only trying to protect you. This is something we couldn’t have planned for properly and how could we have known that Dumbledore would turn on us? Just remember that she’s the only one you can trust in this whole universe... and even then you have to be careful because there’s another Hermione in this universe that isn’t anything like the Hermione we know.”

Ron didn’t say anything for a long time, his shoulders still a little tense from his earlier anger. Hermione finally broke the silence right about when Harry had decided he would take a nap.

“What’s she like?” Hermione asked.

“What’s who like?” Harry asked with a poorly concealed yawn.

“The other Hermione, the one from this universe,” she said. Ron finally turned back to face the corridor, his expression one of guarded curiosity.

“She’s...” Harry paused, trying to think how to phrase what he was thinking. On the one hand, she didn’t want to insult Hermione by comparing the Hermione he’d met with her... but at the same time, the bitch had it coming. “She’s obnoxious,” Harry admitted.

“Hermione’s always been-,” Ron began with a faint smirk but Hermione sent him a death glare. He closed his mouth but had trouble not grinning.

“But this Hermione... she’s obnoxious in a whole other way. The way she worries about being expelled, you’d think she’d done something worth getting arrested for already. It wasn’t like Hermione” he nodded to his friend in the cell “when she gets worried. The one I met was so obsessed with keeping me a secret that she not only didn’t help me find a way home, she’d purposefully get in my way to make sure no one could tell who I was. When I was with them and Dumbledore, Dumbledore was talking about expulsion and Azkaban. Hermione actually looked more terrified of the expelled part.”

“But she always thought that way,” Ron said, still half-smirking.

“But she really meant it,” Harry insisted. “She lied to Flitwick’s face about using the spell that brought me here. And I have the feeling she would have done anything to keep it a secret. The fact that she used a Dark Spell at all... she even knew it probably was one. The only reason she was upset about the spell was that she realized there were visible signs of her having used it. I think she wouldn’t have minded if only I hadn’t shown up.”

“That’s a little scary,” Ron said. “I mean, that this Hermione wouldn’t have any limitations.”

“I’m more worried that she’d be more terrified of being expelled than of Azkaban. It’s Harry’s fault that she was expelled in the end.”

“It was not!” Harry said, his eyes widening. “She’s the one who used the spell that brought me here in the first place! I actually had NOTHING to do with her being expelled!”

“That’s not the way she’ll see it,” Hermione said. “I may not be here but I know what I would have done in her situation. If I thought someone had purposefully gotten me expelled... I don’t know what I’d do to them.”

“But it wouldn’t be pretty,” Ron added for good measure.

A dementor flitted past them, a slightly confused look on its face. It hovered over Harry’s cell for a moment and then moved to Hermione’s. The creature then moved away down the corridor, its head shifting from side to side.

“That’s a little strange,” Ron said.

“I think it may be because we’re not actually happy,” Hermione said.

“You mean all of this arguing might actually be good for us?” Harry asked, half smirking.

“At least it’s good for something,” Ron said.

Unfortunately at this point, Harry and his friends started feeling a little too cheerful. Several excited dementors soon made sure that the three friends no longer felt this way, at least not for long.

Dumbledore sat across from Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall. Dumbledore sat serenely enough in his seat, not giving anything away in his face or his hands, but his feet were tapping soundlessly behind his desk. They could not be seen or heard in their location and Dumbledore needed to release some of the tension in his body from his most recent run-in with Harry Potter. He and his friends from another universe were safely tucked away in Azkaban. The media had been mostly smothered and the Weasleys were kept

in an endless loop of paperwork to keep them out of the way. So far, it was working.

Dumbledore had some time now to plan his next move and, much as he felt that waiting to what would happen next was the best alternative, he sensed that time was a precious commodity he could not afford to squander. He did not know anything about the new Voldemort or what kind of personality he would have. He especially did not know how much patience he would use up before he decided to act.

The point of Dumbledore's meeting now was to determine how he WANTED Voldemort to act. He needed to decide how things would play out now with this new angle. Much as Dumbledore had become a genius at evasion and thinking quickly on his feet, he'd always been something of a control freak when it came to subjects he thought he had complete control over.

"We must decide what to do about the new arrivals," Dumbledore said finally. "The question is, should we attempt to protect the children or should we allow the Death Eaters to destroy them?" He might have been talking about the weather.

McGonagall paled at his words but did little more than lift her chin and grip the arms of her chair until her own fingers resembled claws. Snape didn't so much as blink, staring at the Headmaster. He'd known for years what this was all about, all of the planning Dumbledore did behind the scenes to make sure that HIS world went according to plan. McGonagall had, like so many others, been blissfully unaware for years. But she'd demanded to be a part of all this. She'd demanded to be included in the planning, threatening to go to the papers in fact if they didn't let her help the students. She'd become surprisingly attached to Potter.

"I suggest that we find a way to send them all back to their own universe," Snape said carefully. "We have no idea what kind of damage they can do to our own universe. There have been mentions of throughout the Ministry that certain strange occurrences have taken place, even in front of Muggles-"

“We can’t know what these occurrences were triggered by. They could just as easily be something completely unrelated to our guests,” Dumbledore said.

“Sir, I don’t feel comfortable allowing the children to stay in harm’s way. The fact that Azkaban is actually safer for them than Hogwarts at the moment does not... it doesn’t sit well with me. We have an obligation to-,”

“They are imposter, Minerva,” Dumbledore said somewhat sharply. “We have no obligation to them whatsoever. They are not the students we swore to protect. The Harry Potter who, according to his counterpart, is dead was under our protection. He was under our protection and we failed him.”

The barb worked. Snape watched as Minerva’s jaw tightened and she struggled not to show the emotion on her face. This was a blow against her as a professor and the Head of her House. Potter had been under her supervision and he’d died without her there to stop it. That was one of those facts that would never leave Minerva no matter how much she would try to erase his acid words.

“My question,” Snape interrupted, “is where the Minister is. No one has seen hide or hair of him for days.”

Dumbledore’s foot stopped tapping on the floor. “The Minister is missing?”

Chapter 45: Breakout

Harry stared at the wall, forcing his mind to go over the more unpleasant aspects of his life as a way of blocking the dementors, when something very strange happened to the wall in front of him. As he continued to stare at the individual cracks in the stone, lined with nail marks and splashes of dried blood, the wall glowed and became transparent. The prisoner in the other cell stared at Harry as if his worst nightmare had just come true (perhaps it had). The image on the wall shimmered and went blank, becoming a wall again.

“You... you saw that too, right?” a meek voice asked. Harry shifted closer and poked his head through the bars as far as he could (not much) and looked at his terrified neighbor.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“S-So I’m not crazy,” the man said, sounding just a tad miserable.

“Guess not,” Harry said, looking at Ron. His friend was asleep against the wall, snoring softly. “Hey, Mione, could you wake Ron? I think we’re getting a call.”

“Huh?” Hermione looked up from playing with her clothes, blinking at him as if her mind had been far away. Her hair had frizzed from the damp cell and she was quickly resembling Trelawney on a bad day. Harry focused his thoughts and leaned towards her.

“Wake Ron, I think OUR friends are trying to contact us,” he said. Hermione’s eyes focused and she nodded, moving to whisper to Ron to wake up. She seemed to come back to herself now that she had some purpose, some goal to focus on. Ron woke with a start and kicked the wall hard enough that he cursed and grabbed his ankle. With a glare at Hermione, he relaxed as he heard her quick whispered words, crawling towards her.

“What’s up?” Ron asked, the circles under his eyes making his ears of all things stand out starkly beside his face. Harry reminded himself to focus (why was it so hard to focus in Azkaban?) and leaned

towards them, pressing his forehead against the bars. As they waited, the man in the cell beside Harry's anxiously looked between the three friends.

"Is it going to do that again?" he asked nervously.

"Hopefully," Harry said, his body tense as he waited.

"Are we going to get in trouble? Will the... d-dementors come again?" he asked after a brief silence. He kept twitching, Harry noticed, and seemed terrified of silence. For the brief time Harry had "known" the man, he'd insisted on speaking, even when no one was listening. The sound of his voice must have soothed him.

"Probably," Ron said, keeping his gaze on Harry.

"I d-don't want to get into m-more trouble," the man said in a whisper.

"Why are you in Azkaban?" Hermione asked, tilting her head. The man stared at her with his mouth hanging open, obviously not thinking that anyone gave a damn what his name was. Harry, one of those who didn't care, waited for the man to respond anyway.

"H-Harold. Harold Gulper," the man said. "I-I'm serving a s-sentence of s-seven days for – for – for –" the man took a deep breath, "for money laundering and loan sharking."

"What," Ron said, "could be so awful about THAT as to get you landed in Azkaban?" The man actually blushed and stared down at the ground miserably.

"I-I was... w-working with Death Eaters," he said. Harry felt cold for a moment but, when he saw the expression on Ron's face, they both started laughing. Hermione tried to force a smile away but it was hard. The man looked up, startled by the sound and then glanced fearfully down the corridor. Laughter was the absolute worst sound a person could make in Azkaban. True to their nature, four dementors appeared from both sides of the corridor and stood beside Harry and

Ron's cells for a good ten minutes before they drifted away. Ron choked on his own tears for a minute, struggling to compose himself. Harry just slumped against the bars of his cell, feeling worse than tired.

"I-It wasn't that funny," Hermione said, a little paler but otherwise seemingly alright. Harold Gulper made a whimpering sound in his cell and Hermione's attention returned to him. "Why in the world would you be stupid enough to work with Death Eaters? Did they threaten your family?"

"N-No," Harold said, still shaking as he approached the bars. He looked eager, not scared. He seemed to think that speaking with them was worth every moment in the dementors' presences. "I'm not married. I did it because they gave me a lot of money... and tax breaks."

"Tax breaks?" Ron mumbled, rubbing his face with the back of his wrist. He and Harry exchanged tired but confused looks.

"Oh yeah, the Death Eaters and the Ministry work together. The Minister of Magic's own personal aid spoke with me and signed off on the agreement," Harold said, still eager. Harry felt annoyed with him, and he was usually too tired after a dementor feast to feel much of anything but intense cold.

"If you were working for the Ministry this whole time, then why were you arrested?" Hermione asked, skepticism coloring her words.

"Because I... er, did an interview with the Daily Prophet and I mentioned some people I... er, shouldn't have," Harold looking around nervously, perhaps afraid someone would overhear him. Harold, Harry reflected, had a problem keeping his mouth shut. "The Ministry had to lock me up, t-to save face."

"This is starting to sound like those awful Muggle shows you were telling me about," Ron said to Hermione.

"What Muggle shows?" Harry asked.

“ Those... mafia ones. The ones where everything is a big conspiracy,” Ron said. He snorted. “I wonder who’s the crime boss.”

“You fell asleep when I was explaining that to you,” Hermione said with a note of awe. Ron shrugged.

“I heard some of it... the action sounded interesting but I still don’t know how they could hurt each other without wands... and the whole hitting people instead cars. Didn’t they spell them for protection or something?” Ron said. Hermione only shook her head in amazement, clearly impressed with Ron’s memory.

“I know who the crime boss is,” Harold chirped. The three looked at him again and he glowed under their attention.

“It was theoretical,” Hermione said slowly. “The Ministry and the Death Eaters aren’t a mob.”

“But they are,” Harold insisted. “I’ve seen the ins and outs, I should know! But you can’t tell anyone I told you, the Ministry’d have me killed if they knew how much I know about all this. They’re only punishing me for talking to the media but... I know lots.”

Harry stared at Harold Gulper, really looked at him, and felt a mixture of disgust and pity for the man. He was in good shape physically, probably worked out every day, but it looked more for show than anything else. His hair was balding and even now he patted the empty spot, leaving trails of black muck behind. His gray eyes blinked behind slightly crooked spectacles and in his prison uniform, he looked more like a little boy playing dress up than a criminal. He wondered how long it would take in Azkaban to break Harold down completely. He obviously knew more than anyone expected him to and maybe in the real world, outside of this hell, he could intimidate people with his fake-muscles. In his cell, all alone, he seemed desperate for any form of human contact.

He was going to tell them everything he knew, Harry realized, because he needed a distraction.

“We’re kind of waiting for a call,” Ron said, arching an eyebrow.

“Who’s the mob boss?” Hermione asked. Ron glared at her but she ignored him.

“Well, You-Know-Who is obviously one of the top members of the group – he’s the best assassin and he’s really good at the theatrics. I once saw him have to improv a whole death scene just because one of the other guys got sick and his wife wouldn’t let him leave! The man is brilliant... I don’t know why he bothers with the disguise spell. A good looking bloke like him, I don’t get why he needs the whole snake-face disguise thing. Anyway, so he’s one of the top guys and the Minister is obviously up there too, since he has to make some of the international plans and bring his connections and such in, but see, he’s not the boss either. The boss is-,”

The corridor flickered for a moment. Harry blinked, his mind pausing on that thought. The corridor FLICKERED, like a candle. Harold whimpered and clung to the bars so tightly that he couldn’t move. His body arched back, towards the imaginary safety of the far wall, but his hands would not release the bars. As Harry watched, his peripheral vision darkened so that he felt as if he was looking down a narrow tunnel.

A shape materialized in the center of the corridor, flickering in and out of a solid state. Finally, bathed in gold light, Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape solidified and looked, almost, as if they were really there. Harry squinted and it became a little easier to see them. Ron and Hermione grinned across from him.

“Hullo Professor Dumbledore, Snape,” Ron said. Snape, looking around, sneered.

“Why am I not surprised you landed yourselves in Azkaban?” he said.

“Aw, you miss your widdle home? I’m sure there’s a cell still waiting with your name on it,” Ron said. Snape made as if to walk towards him but Dumbledore’s hand on his arm stopped him.

“Severus, they are cranky. The dementors have been at them for some time?” he glanced at Harry to answer his statement-turned-question. Harry nodded, although he wished he’d said the line instead of Ron. “This is, I must admit, something I had not anticipated.”

“If it makes things more understandable,” Harry said helpfully, “it was you who put us here in the first place.”

“Did I?” Dumbledore asked, his eyebrows going up. “And... why did I do this?”

“The Mark,” Harry said, lifting the sleeve of his shirt. Severus flinched at the sight of it. Harold actually screamed, unclenched his fists from the bars, and threw himself against the wall. Harry ignored him and pushed the sleeve back down. “When Voldemort came through the connection, he used Malfoy to possess me. When I was under, he put the Mark on me out of... er, pettiness I think.”

“Tom can be very petty,” Dumbledore agreed, still looking curious. “So my other self arrested you?”

“He told the Aurors we were talking to to arrest us,” Hermione amended. “Tonks, Mad Eye... they probably think we’re crazy. And dangerous too.”

“We didn’t go quietly,” Ron added with a grim smile.

“I didn’t think you would,” Dumbledore said, his lips twitching with amusement.

“Where is the Dark Lord?” Snape said.

“I have no idea,” Harry said. “All I know is that he’s already started killing people and that Malfoy escaped.”

“YOU,” Ron said, glaring at Snape, “incompetently restrained him. He probably got out in ten minutes.”

“Do you wish for me to leave you here to rot?” Snape asked coolly.

“Why would you do that?” Ron asked innocently. “I was, of course, just talking about your counterpart. He isn’t very smart.”

“Thank you ever so much for clearing that up,” Snape said. “But this leaves us with few options and less information than when the two of you chased after Potter. We must find the Dark Lord and we must bring ALL of you back to our universe.”

“We don’t know where he is,” Hermione said. “And besides, we need to fix things here before we go. We’ve practically destroyed their reality.”

“How could you possibly have done that?” Snape asked, rolling his eyes. He meant it sarcastically but Harry answered anyway.

“The other Harry Potter of this universe is dead, for one,” he said. He lifted his hand and started counting on his fingers. “Ginny Weasley was kidnapped by the Malfoy of our universe, I have a very bad feeling that the Voldemort of our universe killed the Voldemort of THIS universe, my parents and Sirius are still alive and trying to escape the law, and a slew of other problems I haven’t even thought of yet.”

“Those do present issues,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. “But at least you will soon be free of this place. I have asked Remus to monitor his counterpart and I have been told that Sirius and your parents are safe. The four of them together have gathered a force to resistance fighters and they are on their way here.”

“Remus?” Harry said. “I didn’t ever see the Remus of this universe...”

“He has been running from the Ministry since your parents were incarcerated,” Dumbledore said. “We thought that our interference may have been necessary, under the circumstances, but we are fortunate in that there are others coming to your aid instead. The universe is unstable already – sending more people here may create a chain reaction the results of which may be disastrous.”

“The universes could merge,” Hermione said. “Or they could both collapse. Or just one might collapse. Or we might destroy all of them at once.”

“Or nothing might happen,” Snape said. “That is precisely the point. We do not wish to interfere any further. Keep your communication with us brief and focus on a way to escape as quickly as possible. Find the Dark Lord, kill him if you can, bring him back if you can’t, and get out of here.”

“What about my parents? What about Sirius?” Harry asked. He hadn’t really intended to say anything about what he was thinking but he couldn’t stop the question. He needed to know...

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, his voice sad, “they cannot come to our universe. We have no idea the long term, or even the short term, impact of staying for so long might have on them. We can only speculate the consequences.”

“But they’re in danger here... Voldemort, the Ministry... everyone is out to get them here. There’s nowhere they can go, nothing they can do. Their own son is dead and if I go... they won’t have anything at all. They’ll be in more danger than when we got here and they’ll just get themselves killed.”

“I’m afraid that is something we cannot deal with at this moment,” Dumbledore said. “Harry, you must understand that you must escape Azkaban first, before anything else can be accomplished.”

“I won’t abandon them,” Harry said stubbornly.

“We will try to keep that from happening,” Dumbledore said. Ron gritted his teeth and Hermione frowned. “That is the best I can do at the moment. We are doing our best to monitor the events in this universe. For now, all I can advise you to do is what you do best. Stay alive.” Snape snorted and began to fade. Dumbledore remained.

“Sir, you’re starting to fade,” Hermione said. Harry didn’t think it worth mentioning but Dumbledore frowned.

“The reception is quite awful,” he said. “We have been unable to solidify the link properly as we did when we spoke to Harry the last time.”

Snape’s mouth moved but no sound came out. He looked frustrated that no one answered, as it had evidently been a question, but when he repeated himself they still couldn’t hear him.

“Severus has asked who else in this universe knows that you are duplicates,” Dumbledore said, noticing the problem.

“The Dumbledore here knows, some of the professors know, the other Snape knows...” Harry paused, thinking. “The Malfoy and Ginny Weasley know... Neville might know too.”

“Perhaps they can help yo-,” Dumbledore’s image fizzled out and both he and Snape vanished. The light in the corridor shifted back (a change Harry hadn’t noticed earlier) and the tension left the air. Ron cursed softly under his breath and Hermione got to her feet, pressing her cheek against the bars to look down the corridor. Harry leaned back and rubbed his forehead, subconsciously sensing the pain of his connection with Voldemort. It had been difficult to block his mind with Occlumency but he was pretty sure Voldemort hadn’t heard any of their conversation. Not that there was much to it – most of it had been a waste of time and too short to ask anything substantial.

The only good news was that someone was coming to rescue them.

With that thought, Harry heard an explosion far off. It wasn’t noticeable at first, growing louder and louder with every passing

moment. Harry gripped the bars of his cell when the sound took form and the walls buckled under the pressure.

“This is going to hurt,” Ron observed. The entire corridor exploded and Harry’s mind went blank.

Tonks felt light as air as she descended on Azkaban from her broom, her robes collecting smoke as she drifted over the explosion. Mad Eye might have been many things, but expert in Muggle explosives hadn’t been something Tonks would have thought him capable of. He’d always seemed the type to hate anything non-Magical but the second Remus explained the change in rescue plans, he’d pulled a duffle bag from under his chair and revealed different-colored wires, a fancy-looking detonator, and a whole lot of C-4. He’d explained what everything was to her and, when prodded, explained that he’d dated an explosives expert for about a year while traveling in his youth. He’d kept up with it since.

Which was why there were here now, flying over Azkaban looking for Harry Potter and his friends. Sirius’s story had sounded crazy – other universes, doppelgangers, TWO Dark Lords... she wouldn’t have believed it if she hadn’t met the other Harry. She wouldn’t have believed it if she hadn’t seen the way he radiated something Other. And she wasn’t about to let stupid Fundungus find Potter before her.

She dipped into the ruins, mentally chastising Mad Eye for using way too much, and noticed a pair of broken spectacles under some rubble. She descended and planted her feet on a large slab of stone. She started pushing rocks aside with her hands, remembering Mad Eye’s warning that Azkaban behaved very strangely to magic, and eventually found a battered hand. The hand, luckily, was attached to someone alive.

Hermione Granger, a girl she’d never met before they’d seen each other in the Ministry, looked half-dead as Tonks carefully lifted her out of the rubble and dusted off her pants as best she could. She heard Remus land somewhere behind her and push the rubble away, grunting as he found someone with a shock of red hair. Someone cursed above her and she heard a dull thud as Arthur Weasley landed beside Remus and grabbed the boy.

“Ron! Ron, wake up!” he said. Tonks carefully dragged Hermione towards the group, fiddling with her wand to apply splints. The explosion had broken Hermione’s hand. Now that she was closer, she could see that Ron didn’t look much better. The bone was poking out of his shin and he had a large gash across his cheek. Remus quickly did some minor healing spells while Arthur continued to shake him gently, calling his name.

“I found Potter,” Mad Eye said, about twenty feet away. He carried Harry towards them on his broom, setting the boy down beside his friends. He looked to be the best off of all his friends. Tonks pulled the broken spectacles towards her and fixed them, handing them to Mad Eye.

“Dad...” Ron mumbled, his eyes fluttering a little. He looked as if he were waking from a dream. “Hey Dad...” he said, recognizing his father. He grinned and then gasped, clenching his eyes at the pain in his face.

“I’m here,” Arthur said quickly, staring at him. “I’m here.” He glared at Mad Eye and then looked back down at his son, speaking to him calmly despite the tears running down his face. “Don’t you worry, we’ll have you all fixed up in no time. These things heal... you’ll be right as rain before your mother sees you.”

Ron laughed, this time ignoring the pain. “This is really not so bad,” he said. “Trust me... Harry and I have been through way worse.” At the mention of his best friend, Ron lifted his head and looked from Hermione to Harry. Satisfying himself that his friends were alright, he settled back against Remus and closed his eyes. “Not that I enjoy getting blown up or anything.”

“We hadn’t intended for the explosion to take out the entire top floor,” Tonks explained as she applied bandages to Hermione’s head. She also took some ointment from an inside pocket and applied it to the worst cuts. “We only meant to make an entrance big enough for us to get in and out quickly.”

“Explosives used to be sold in much smaller quantities before,” Mad Eye said, a note of hurt in his voice. “I had no idea they packed so much punch these days.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ron said, his eyes still closed as Tonks carefully applied her ointment to Ron’s face. He didn’t even flinch. Tonks stared with a tad of admiration as she continued lathering the ointment on him. Arthur also seemed to have trouble watching his son show no reaction to what must have been tremendous pain. “Harry and Hermione are alive, that’s all that matters.”

“I’m glad YOU’RE alive,” Arthur said, emotion making his voice rough. Ron half-smirked.

“In my universe, you would never have said that,” he said. Arthur stared down at him strangely, feeling suddenly out of breath. That’s right... this wasn’t really his son. This was... someone else’s son, somewhere else. “You and mum adore Harry and Hermione, probably more than me,” Ron continued, the smile widening with some inner thought. “Mum is constantly worried about Harry... always thinking he hasn’t had enough to eat. She sends him sweaters at Christmas, same as us, fusses over him worse than Ginny, everything. We’ve practically adopted him.”

Arthur watched this strange boy-man who wasn’t his son speak as Arthur had only ever dreamed his son could speak. He felt guilty for the thought. He didn’t hate HIS Ron – on the contrary. But there was something so... noble, about this strange Ron. The way he wasn’t complaining at all, the way he was speaking with such fierce loyalty and devotion about his companions. Like a warrior. The thought made Arthur embarrassed – the thought was so archaic – but he couldn’t help feeling the swell of pride.

“Does your... your mother like this Hermione girl too?” he asked casually. Ron, his eyes still closed with a pleasant smile on his face, actually laughed.

“I hope so. You both went nuts when I told you we were dating. Your exact words were “Finally! We thought a Death Eater would

have to Stupefy some sense into you before long!” And then you wanted to have “the talk,” which, by the way, please don’t do to anyone else ever again if you can help it.” Ron’s expression changed to one of mild embarrassment, his ears turning pink.

“I think he’ll be alright,” Remus said, a hint of a smile in his voice. He pulled Harry carefully onto his broom and ascended into the air. Tonks and Mad Eye shifted Ron between them as Arthur carefully carried Hermione (Ron was dating her?! She had to be very special!) into the air. Ron must have thought his father wouldn’t be able to hear him anymore. Whatever his motivation, Arthur heard Ron say, mostly to himself, “And go easy on your Ginny. Harry mentioned something about her dating Malfoy now...”

The disgust in Ron’s voice was nothing to the outraged “WHAT?!” from Arthur Weasley as they sped away from Azkaban.

Author’s Note: once again, here is the link to Amazon. Please go buy my book!! Pleaseeeeeeeee!! I will resort to groveling, seriously! [www.
/Skull-Juggler-Disenchanted-Natalia-
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Chapter 46: Planning

Harry swore never to complain again for an entire week if only his head would stop pounding. He felt as if someone had set up shop inside his skull and thought it would be great to throw a hard metal party. And when he opened his eyes, he could have sworn some idiot with a beer had bumped into the stereo and cranked up the volume in his head. With a soft groan, he rolled over and fell off the bed.

With a muttered curse, he carefully lifted himself off the floor and opened his eyes again, looking around. The room was one big multi-colored blur. Harry wondered if this was because his glasses were missing or because he felt as if he'd just woken up on the wrong side of a hangover. Someone grunted somewhere above him and he looked up, squinting into the semi-darkness. He might as well have closed his eyes for the good they were doing him.

Reaching instinctively into his robes, Harry took out his wand and stood, pointing it in the direction he remembered the sound. He carefully moved with his hand outstretched, slightly crouched to feel anything that might trip him. Despite his efforts, something low to the ground seemed to curl around his feet as he walked and with a surprised curse, Harry crashed into what felt like a desk, if the pens and papers that pinched and fluttered around his head were any indication.

“Wha? What happened?” Ron’s surprised voice came from where Harry had come from. Harry grunted, feeling embarrassed that he’d gone to all that trouble thinking that RON was the dangerous one in the room. He carefully extracted himself from the desk and brushed himself off, squinting in the direction Ron must have been in.

“Have you seen my glasses?” Harry asked.

“Wha? Oh, yeah, one second. I see them,” there was shuffling from Ron’s direction and then he heard Ron’s heavy footsteps. Harry extended his hand and Ron put something metallic and familiar into his hands. Harry sighed with relief as he cleaned the glasses on his

shirt and then put them on. "Wow, you look terrible," Ron said as he came into focus.

"You don't look all that great either," Harry said, arching an eyebrow. They eyed each other, specifically the multiple bandages and some splints, but especially the deep purple and green bruises coloring their faces.

"Weren't we in Azkaban?" Harry said, frowning. The headache had finally started to recede, for which he was eternally thankful. He mentally swore not to complain, reorganizing his thoughts.

"My dad busted us out," Ron said, sitting on the bed with a wince. Harry reassessed Ron's condition and realized that he looked worse than usual. He moved to sit as well so that Ron wouldn't have to move around. "Mad Eye was there... and Tonks and Remus too. My dad was there. Er, I don't really remember what I said to them. I wasn't thinking straight." He glanced down at himself and then back up, pointing out his obviously painful situation.

"Just my luck to miss out when you spill your guts," Harry said, looking thoughtfully around the room. It looked painfully familiar. Where had he seen that decaying wallpaper before?

"I'm sure I said something particularly negative about Malfoy," Ron said a little hopefully. "It'd be nice if they go kill him for us now."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Where's Hermione?"

"They took her to another room," Ron said, his face tensing as he tried to remember. "I think she broke her hand in the explosion... they were healing her. By the way, we should kill Mad Eye. He's the one that blew everything up."

"Hmm," Harry said. "Well, I don't remember any of it so I'm not really mad at him. I just want to make sure Mione's okay." He stood again and went to the door. He paused, staring at the doorknob. There was a little nick under the keyhole. It reminded him of where he was. "Oh!" he said.

“What?” Ron groaned as he dragged himself to his feet. He limped a little but stubbornly came after his friend.

“We’re in Sirius’s house,” Harry said, sounding surprised. “I mean... well, of course they’d bring us here. I just didn’t... think about it. I guess Kretcher must be around here somewhere.” He made a face as he carefully opened the door and looked around. Much as he wanted to relax, knowing he was among friends, he still tensed and felt in his pocket for his wand. It was there, ready for him.

“I guess we were officially rescued by the Order,” Ron said. “This must still be their headquarters even after everything that’s happened in this universe. Someone on the Order must have believed that Sirius and your parents were innocent.”

“Someone was bound to have a brain,” Harry muttered. He instinctively opened the door immediately to his right and smiled in relief. Hermione was sleeping in the only bed in the room. Someone had taken the time to clean up before putting her there – a clearly defined line separated Hermione from years of grime.

Ron limped into the room, his hand already outstretched to touch Hermione’s shoulder. She seemed to relax at the contact, even smiling a little. Harry sat down at the corner of the bed, smiling at the picture his best friends made. They were the only couple he’d ever seen that didn’t make him jealous. They usually fought like cats and dogs, often put Harry’s life before their own lives (and also in front of their relationship most of the time), and he’d known them for so many years, he just couldn’t feel anything but adoration for his closest friends finally realizing they were in love with each other.

“Stop it, you’re going to make me throw up,” Harry said softly to Ron. He couldn’t keep the smile out of his voice.

Ron ignored him, gently petting Hermione’s hair back. “You wish you didn’t think we were cute,” he said softly. “She looks awfully pale.”

“It’s your face,” Harry insisted, inspecting her. Hermione did indeed look a little pale. “She can’t stand the sight of you.” He gently lifted Hermione’s head and inspected her more closely. “Yup, see? There’s a little tinge of green around her ears.”

“Wha’re you mumblin’ ‘bout?” Hermione groaned, her eyes fluttering open. She scowled at Harry in such a grumpy way, he couldn’t help laughing. Ron grinned and helped her sit up, propping her against the pillows so that she could look at them.

“Good to see you too, Mione,” Ron said. “We don’t know what’s going on, we just woke up,” he added, seeing the question in Hermione’s eyes. She frowned deeper and shifted painfully, wincing once or twice as she adjusted on her bed. She took a moment to pause and look at her hand for a moment – it was in a cast.

“What’s this?” she asked. “Are we in a Muggle hospital?”

“No,” Ron said. “We’re at Grimmauld Place. The Order brought us here after they blew up Azkaban.”

“They blew up Azkaban?” Hermione asked with a frown. “Why would they do something so ridiculous?”

“We’re not sure,” Harry said. “But I’m pretty sure it was to, oh, I don’t know, rescue us?”

“Ah,” Hermione said with the same disapproving tone. She looked wearily at her arm in the cast again and sighed. “I probably don’t even want to know why they couldn’t heal this the normal way.” She looked directly at Harry, her expression resolved. “What are we going to do?”

“I thought I was supposed to ask you that,” Harry grumbled. He didn’t mean it – he’d been considering their options since the moment he’d woken up. “We should probably prepare ourselves for some kind of interrogation and a long explanation from our side so that they can understand exactly what they’re dealing with. We should also prepare a game plan... the usual: rescue Ginny from Malfoy, kill Voldemort, save the world...”

“... except this time we’re saving TWO worlds,” Hermione interjected.

“Except this time we’re saving two worlds,” Harry continued. “And at the same time find a way back home...?” he made the statement a question, looking at Hermione. She scowled down at her hand – her wand hand – and tapped the cast lightly.

“We’ll need to wait for my hand to heal a little more before we can do that,” Hermione said. “Ron and I know the spell and we’ve trained to do it but... yeah.”

“You’re mortally wounded,” Ron said cheerfully. He was pacing back and forth in front of the door. “Whenever you’re ready, Mione. My dad’s down there.”

“IS he,” Hermione said, looking interested now. “Did he blow up the prison then?” she said this last bit with more of an edge in her voice than Harry expected. He frowned and looked between a suddenly tense Ron and a scowling Hermione.

“Of course he didn’t,” Ron said, trying to sound casual. “Jeez, Mione, he didn’t mean for us to get injured. And besides, we aren’t even dating in this universe.”

“It seems to be a mutual dislike,” Hermione said in that same forced calm. Harry frowned and looked between his best friends again.

“Okay, what’s going on? Why are you mad at Mr. Weasley?” Harry demanded.

“I’m not mad at him,” Hermione said in a voice that said yes, yes she WAS mad at Mr. Weasley. Harry looked at Ron, who’d resumed pacing in front of the door. Ron wore a scowl on his face as he stomped around, making the dust on the doorframe flick off lightly and coat the air so that he seemed to be a whirlwind of activity in the room.

“Ron, what the hell? Tell me what’s going on,” Harry said. Ron remained tight-lipped, still scowling. Harry stood and grabbed his arm. “Do NOT leave me in the dark. What happened?”

Hermione and Ron refused to look at each other, glaring at opposite ends of the room. Finally, Ron caved under the pressure and exhaled sharply. He dug a hand through his hair, looking somewhat like a Q-tip as he did so, and glared at the back of Hermione’s head.

“Dad and Hermione got into a fight before we came here,” Ron said.

“He was completely unreasonable,” Hermione said sharply.

“He only meant to protect us!” Ron said, obviously falling into some age-old argument that he and Hermione were comfortable having. Harry only watched in surprise as the two started bickering. “Besides, it doesn’t matter what he said, we’re here now aren’t we? We’re helping Harry and we’re going to get home as soon as you’re all healed up.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that he was completely off-base saying what he did to me. He knows that it isn’t like that with me and Harry and for him to assume that the only reason we wanted to do that was just... just...!” Hermione scowled sharply and fell silent, glaring at the wall again.

“What is going on?” Harry demanded when he could take it no longer. “Mr. Weasley couldn’t possibly think that Hermione and me...?”

“What?” Ron looked at Harry and turned bright red. “No! That’s not it at all!”

“Then explain to me what the hell you’re arguing about!” Harry yelled, glaring at him.

“Mr. Weasley,” Hermione said in an acidic tone, “didn’t want us to come to this universe after you.” She said this as if it explained everything. Harry waited exasperatedly for her to continue. “He,” she

continued when she saw the look on Harry's face, "said that Ron and I are too connected with you, that the only reason we started dating is because we're both in love with YOU."

Harry just stared at her. When he realized that this was IT, the reason they were angry with each other, he started laughing. When Ron thwacked him on the arm to shut him up, he only laughed hard, clutching his sides to keep from exploding. He fell back against the grimy wall, felt the wallpaper stick to his shirt, but he kept laughing so hard that tears creased from his eyes.

"He t-thinks you're..." he laughed harder. Ron was blushing, glaring at the wall.

"He didn't mean it literally!" Ron said. "He meant that Hermione and my worlds kind of... kind of circle around you, when you're in danger, when bad things happen. And he meant that we're a little too obsessed with keeping you safe and he THOUGHT that us going to this other universe to find you was just more proof that Hermione and I needed to... to distance ourselves from you for a while so we could figure out who WE are, as a couple and as people and he just... STOP LAUGHING!"

"He meant that we aren't a good couple," Hermione said sharply, "and he didn't think YOUR BEST FRIENDS should risk their lives to go find you."

"It isn't that!" Ron said. "He was just trying to protect us! He would never purposefully want us to put our lives on the line but he was just as willing to come here himself to get Harry!"

"Okay, okay," Harry said, holding a hand up as he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. His friends instantly fell silent, glaring at each other. Harry huffed a little, getting back his breath before he looked at his friends in turn. "You both need to calm down. This isn't the time to worry about this stuff, especially to fight over it. Mr. Weasley was just trying to protect you both AND-" he raised his voice when Hermione tried to interrupt, "AND, he probably does think that you're both a little too obsessed with me. So you're both right. Happy? Now can we

please get back to the subject at hand, namely what are we going to say when we go downstairs?"

There was a moment of tense silence but Harry let it linger, waiting for them to cool off. Hermione gnawed on her bottom lip, fighting with her own stubbornness as Ron glared at the floor. Ron finally huffed sharply and sat beside Hermione, stubbornly grabbing her hand and looking up at Harry.

"Okay," Harry said, seeing that they both had grudgingly put the argument aside for now. "Let's start brainstorming. What's our strategy?"

"We need to find out how long we've been unconscious," Hermione said, gently squeezing Ron's hand. "We need to know how long we've been without news of Voldemort. We need to find out how much on our side they are."

"All good questions," Harry said. "Now let's hear some more."

Remus looked around the kitchen as he sipped his very bad tea. He remembered that particular grandfather clock being in the living room, the china was definitely chipped from the last time he'd seen it, and the oppressive window by the sink was still as nightmare inducing as always (Mrs. Black had once threatened to skin him on it). As he looked around, he wondered how his life could have possibly taken him to this place. He'd only been in Sirius's house once before, only to be yelled at for being "unpure" by Sirius's insane mother, but now he was in the kitchen getting yelled at by the house elf. It was something he'd never expected – to be yelled at again. He'd spent most of his life ensuring that no one could ridicule him, at least not to his face.

"Mistress wants you to stop touching Mistress's cupses!" Kretcher was shrieking, jumping up and down in front of him. He never would have dared do this in front of Sirius, but then again Remus and Kretcher had a history. Namely, Remus locking Kretcher in a closet and magically sealing it for three days while Aurors searched the Black house for evidence of Dark Magic. He'd been training to be an

Auror (something that was cut off when Kretcher tattled that he was a werewolf). At the time, Remus had still been angry and had thought at the time that Sirius had indeed been a Dark Wizard like the papers said he had been.

“Shut it,” a grumpy voice said from the doorway. Remus looked up as Arthur Weasley trudged into the kitchen and slumped into the chair across from him. Remus took a moment to observe his friend, something he had not done in years; Arthur had the look of being trampled on my stampeding hippogriffs. His eyes were slightly blood-shot and dark with heavy bruised bags.

“You look bright and chipper,” Remus observed, nursing his tea. “Didn’t get too much sleep?” Arthur snorted, fumbling with the kettle to get some of his own tea.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Arthur admitted. “I kept having nightmares about Ron... it’s too strange. The boy upstairs is not Ron, but I’ll be damned, he does look and sound like him. It’s very frustrating.” He shuffled around the room, scratching his balding head as he poured the hot water into a chipped mug. Kretcher gnawed on the edge of his tea cozy, hopping from foot to foot behind Arthur as he came to sit across from Remus. He sipped the hot liquid, made a face, and took a second sip.

“So...” Remus said, “Ron.”

“He’s dating that other girl,” Arthur exploded. Remus jumped, nearly dropping his mug. “He’s dating that girl! Remus, he is dating. I mean, I knew he was around that age where boys become interested in girls, and god knows I’ve gone through it all with the other boys, but Ron is dating. Do you have any idea what that means?”

“Er...” Remus said, cringing a little from the angry man across from him. “You need to have “the talk” with him soon?”

Arthur opened his mouth and then closed it, his face draining of color. “You don’t think he and... he wouldn’t...”

“I’m sure your counterpart in the other universe has already had a talk with him about that,” Remus said quickly, seeing the panicked man sway a little in his chair. This assuaged Arthur’s impending heart attack and returned the ruddy color to his cheeks.

“What this means is that I’m getting old,” Arthur said in a much calmer voice. “He mentioned something about Ginny dating now too. I’m not sure how I’m going to tell Molly. She always says she can’t wait for Ginny to start dating, but I just know, I know she’s going to start crying and complaining about getting older too and want to buy all of those youth regenerating potions and reminiscing about our younger, wilder days,” here he paused and had the decency to blush as Remus’s uncomfortable expression, “and I don’t know if I can take it again. I could when she did it for Bill and Charlie... and even with Percy, but I have a lot of kids, Remus. I can’t take much more of this before I start thinking I am an old man.”

“I’m... er, sorry?” Remus said, feeling like a caged animal. He’d never experienced a break-down quite like this and Arthur did not show any signs of slowing down. In fact, he seemed to be gathering steam now that Remus was listening. Hell, he could have been anyone by the looks of Arthur’s slightly crazed expression.

“It isn’t easy,” Arthur continued, “being a father to so many children. I love all of them but the stress...” he shook his head, “I can’t even tell you. Do you have any idea how many times Fred and George have blown up some form of school property?”

“Er...”

“329 times,” Arthur continued, “and do you have any idea how many times I have had to bail Charlie out of prison for trespassing on private property chasing animals that are more interested in burning his fingers off before letting him pet them?”

“I really wouldn’t know,” Remus said, searching for an exit.

“Dad, stop complaining,” a gruff voice said from the doorway. Arthur stopped in mid breath and looked up as Ron, Harry, and Hermione came into the kitchen. Hermione looked slightly uncomfortable but Harry looked extremely amused.

“Hi,” Arthur said in a strangled voice.

“Hey, Dad,” Ron said as he plopped down in a chair and immediately groaned, leaning to one side with his arms wrapped around his stomach. “Ow, that was stupid.”

“Mmm,” Hermione said as she sat next to Ron, glancing at Remus. “Hello Mr. Weasley, Remus,” she nodded to both.

“Hello Kretcher,” Harry said. Kretcher, who’d been about to scream at all the new people, jerked back in surprise.

“Hello Harry Potter,” Kretcher said uncomfortably.

“How have you been?” Harry continued pleasantly. Kretcher seemed about to swallow his own tongue, looking around worriedly.

“Kretcher has been... well,” he said.

“I’m glad. I don’t know how things are in this universe but I hope that Dobby has been here helping you, and I suppose Blinky too,” Harry said. Kretcher continued to stare at him as if he were from another planet. “Blinky’s a house elf too?” Harry tried, thinking Kretcher didn’t know who he was talking about. “Um, she’s the house elf for the Pettigrew family?”

“Kretcher knows who is Blinky and Dobby,” Kretcher said in a strange voice.

“Oh, good. Well, if you see them please tell them I said hello,” Harry said, smiling. “I never met Blinky in my own universe, but I know Dobby pretty well. He helped me during a... er, bad time at school.”

“And you freed him,” Hermione chirped happily.

“And then,” Ron said dryly, “you went on a let’s-free-the-house-elves spree.”

Kretcher sucked in his breath as if he’d been mortally wounded, his tennis ball eyes nearly popping out of their sockets as the “freed” part of the conversation. Hermione and Ron glared at each other and both opened their mouths but Harry put a stop to the fighting before it could start.

“Yeah, but Dobby was happy I freed him. The Malfoys mistreated him and didn’t treat him well,” he said. “The house elves at Hogwarts were happy to be there. Anyway, we’re past that. Just tell Dobby and Blinky I said hi if you see them.”

“Kretcher will,” Kretcher said, still sounding a little stunned. He looked around the kitchen nervously and played with the end of his tea cozy. “Does... does Master Harry want some tea?” he finally asked. Remus and Arthur, stunned by the conversation, nearly had heart attacks in the same moment. But, since heart attacks are not things to be experienced in the same moment by two men in different stages of health and age, they settled instead for making strangled sounds.

“That would be great, Kretcher, thank you,” Harry said and sat down, smiling at him. Kretcher nodded absently and went to the oven, casting furtive glances at Harry as if expecting the dark-haired boy to throw something at him while he wasn’t looking. Ron shook his head and muttered softly.

“He isn’t nearly so bad in this universe,” he said.

“That’s a good thing,” Hermione whispered back. “At least it’s less likely he’ll give us away like the Kretcher we know did.”

“What are you talking about?” Remus half-whispered, feeling foolish about intruding on this somewhat secretive conversation. Harry and

the others glanced at him, guilt flashing across their faces, before Ron grinned.

“Nothing, just remembering some stuff from our own universe,” he said.

“Speaking of which,” Hermione cut in, “thank you for rescuing us from Azkaban. Dumbledore told us you’d be coming.”

“Dumbledore?” Remus said. “How would Dumbledore know we were coming? We didn’t tell him.” He glanced nervously at Arthur. Had someone leaked information? Why would they tell Dumbledore when the Headmaster must have already been overloaded with other duties? He’d been placed in charge of the Ministry now that the media had gotten ahold of the information that the Minister was missing, kidnapped by You-Know-Who, and the man was also running one of the most prestigious magic schools in all of Europe. Who would have been dumb enough to-

“The Dumbledore from our universe told us,” Hermione amended. “He’s been trying to keep track of things from his end so that he can tell us what’s going on. Unfortunately, the connection was interrupted and we didn’t get too much information from him.”

“We know bad things are happening,” Ron pointed out. “Which isn’t anything new.”

“Anyway,” Harry said, “we want to get involved with the Order. If you’re willing to break us out of Azkaban, we thought that you could help us.”

“Help you do what exactly?” Arthur asked.

“Kill Voldemort,” Harry said firmly. Kretcher dropped the teakettle over the stove and the sharp noise of metal-on-metal made everyone but Harry jump. Arthur stared at him slack-jawed and Remus mumbled something about needing a drink.

“Kill the Dark Lord?” Arthur said incredulously.

“He isn’t the same Dark Lord,” Ron said. “He’s the Dark Lord from our universe.”

“He isn’t someone you want to mess with,” Hermione added. “I have a plan for how to find him and make sure we can have the upper hand in a fight.”

“Wait wait wait,” Remus said. “Hang on a minute. You want to kill the Dark Lord from your own universe? What makes you think you can?”

“Harry can,” Ron said firmly. “It’s the whole reason he’s been trying to kill Harry for so many years.” Remus was about to argue when a memory clicked in the back of his mind. That’s right, he’d had a similar conversation with Sirius a little while ago. Things were different in this other universe – much different than anyone was immediately aware of. Even the people from that other world were constantly surprised by the radical changes and this one, Harry being the Boy Who Lived instead of Neville Longbottom, seemed to be one of the biggest differences.

“As I said, I have a plan,” Hermione said. “But we’ll all have to split up and do different things. For starters, we have to get Ginny.”

“Ginny?” Arthur piped up. “Why in the world do we need to get Ginny?”

“...Dumbledore didn’t tell you?” Harry asked, his eyes widening. “Draco Malfoy took her to Voldemort.”

“Malfoy did what?” Arthur roared, rising to his feet.

“Dumbledore didn’t tell you?!” Harry demanded.

“Malfoy did what?!” Arthur said louder.

“He’s the Malfoy of our universe,” Hermione said. “He’s working for the Dark Lord.”

“Ginny...” Arthur gasped, clutching his chest. Remus very suddenly had a good idea of what Arthur meant about children and stress. Arthur looked as if he very well might have that heart attack they’d almost experienced together and this time, there was no law of averages to get in the way of him experiencing one at that moment.

“Mr. Weasley, please calm down,” Harry said firmly. “Hermione was just about to explain her plan to get Ginny out of there. We can’t very well go through with it if you’re having a coronary.”

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